

Jinko Fuyuno

ふゆの仁子

Illustrated By
Noboru Takatsuki

タカツキノボル

All You Need Is
体だけじゃたりねえよ。

Love.

vol. II

PARENTAL
EXPLICIT CONTENT
ADVISORY



Yaoi Novel

VISIT...

LANZAROTE
Caliente.COM

"I'm never letting you go again." His gelled hair had fallen across his sweaty forehead. His words were mixed with frantic breaths, sinking into Junya's body like a spell. "I don't care if you tell me to go away. Your life—your love—it's all mine."



Now reunited after an eight-year separation, Junya Sawa, a young bank executive, and Uzuki Kobayakawa, heir to a *yakuza* gang leader, have resumed their relationship in Tokyo. After betraying Uzuki's trust when they were teenagers, Junya swears never to make the same mistake again.

Unknown to them both, shadowy forces are at work in the Koryu Alliance, the *yakuza* gang run by Uzuki's father. When Junya is kidnapped, will Uzuki be able to save him?

The steamy romance that began in *All You Need Is Love* continues in Vol. 2. Jinko Fuyuno (*Eat Or Be Eaten, All You Need Is Love*) brings the colorful *yakuza* underworld to life. Can two young men from two different worlds ever find happiness together?



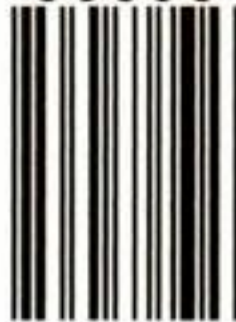
NOVEL / DRAMA / ROMANCE

US \$8.95

ISBN 978-1-56970-611-4



50895



9 781569 706114



All You Need Is Love.
体だけじゃたりねえよ。
vol. II

Kobayakawa whispered in Sawa's ear as he began a powerful rhythm with his hips. The words were soft and clear, so Sawa would understand them.

All You Need Is Love. 味だけじゃたりねえよ。 Vol. II

Written by
JINKO FUYUNO

Illustrations by
NOBORU TAKATSUKI

English translation by
Karen McGillicuddy

Written By
JINKO FUYUNO
Birthday: October 10th
Zodiac Sign: Libra
Blood Type: A
Residence: Tokyo

I've been obsessed with the Kewpie company's commercial for their *tarako* mayonnaise. The one with the legion of kewpie dolls all dressed in tarako costumes singing "tarako, tarako." I'll never forget the way it made me feel the first time I saw it.

Other novels published by
JUNÉ

Only The Ring Finger Knows vol.1
The Lonely Ring Finger

Don't Worry Mama

The Man Who Doesn't
Take Off His Clothes vol.1-2

Cold Sleep

Little Darling

Ai No Kusabi – The Space Between
Vol.1- Stranger

Sweet Admiration

Better Than A Dream

S vol. 1-3

Contents

All You Need Is Love, Vol. 2.....9

One Perfect Day.....203

Postscript.....217

Prologue

The small back room of the cheap cabaret was filled with the sour smell of sweat and tobacco. The lone fluorescent bulb in the room flickered occasionally. Neon signs and moonlight shone in through the window, making Uzuki Kobayakawa's face more beautiful than Junya Sawa had ever seen it.

"I'm never letting you go again."

His gelled hair had fallen across his sweaty forehead. His words were mixed with frantic breaths, sinking into Junya's body like a spell.

"I don't care if you tell me to go away. Your life—your love—it's all mine."

Uzuki's arms tightened around Junya and his thighs began to shake, their two bodies connected by passion.

"And my life—my love—are all yours."

Uzuki was pressed as close as it was physically possible for him to be, and he was pledging his love to Junya.

They had met nine years earlier. Back then, Junya had been so powerless that leaving Uzuki had been his only option.

Now, he was still powerless. But knowing that he was powerless gave him strength he hadn't had before. Even though they knew they were powerless, the two

could not leave one another.

The road ahead of them would be much harder than Junya could imagine. But no matter what happened, he would never regret being with Uzuki. And he would never do anything to make Uzuki regret being with him.

Junya's breathing grew ragged from the intensity of their lovemaking, as he formed these resolutions.

Chapter One

It was 8:00 p.m.—Junya Sawa hadn't noticed how late it had gotten. This wasn't the first time.

He hurriedly organized the papers he had been working on and shut off his computer, preparing to leave. As if on cue, his cell phone chimed to announce the arrival of a new message.

I'm at the hotel. —U

A smile came over Junya's face. His heart, which until that moment had been perfectly calm, became a thudding drum in his chest.

He had plans to meet this "U"—Uzuki Kobayakawa—in an hour.

It had been more than two weeks since they'd last seen each other. The thought of seeing him again made Junya nervous. He decided he would answer the message later and turned instead to the task of clearing up.

Junya, who had graduated from a university two hours outside the city—though still within the Kanto region—had gotten a job at a local bank through his father's connections. Last year the bank had undergone a financial reorganization and merged with a corporate bank in the city. As a result, Junya had been reassigned to a branch office in Tokyo.

At first it had been hard for Junya, unused to his new duties and coworkers. But now, a year after his

reassignment, he was much more comfortable on all fronts.

"Hey, Sawa."

Just as he was ready to leave, his boss called out to him. Junya sighed at the terrible timing and set his coat back down. He turned around, not letting any annoyance show on his face. "What can I do for you, Fujiyama-san?"

"How about going out for a drink tonight?"

The skin around Fujiyama's eyes crinkled as he smiled amicably at Junya.

Last September, Junya had received a promotion as part of his transfer within the company, so now he had a new boss. His old boss had been an obnoxious, incompetent pest. He'd given Junya more than his share of grief.

His new boss, Fujiyama, had spent his entire career in the operations department of the main branch. Junya had heard that Fujiyama had been transferred out to reorganize the branch offices that hadn't been performing up to speed lately.

Wild rumors had preceded his arrival. Everyone was terrified imagining the authoritarian they were going to be stuck with. But once they'd actually met him, they discovered he was a pleasant, insightful, and generous man.

The rumors had been right about the fact that he was good at his job, and that he had a mind like a steel trap. In a mere six months, he had rid the office of its inefficiencies and fundamentally changed the way they did business.

He abolished the system of seniority and taught the bank tellers about international business. He provided opportunities to the people willing to work for them, and reinvigorated the employees in general. Fujiyama believed that this would translate into greater customer satisfaction.

And in fact, the internal revolution began to have an outward effect. Their business was growing. Junya's department in particular had improved its performance remarkably. Fujiyama was friendly, a man of his word, and his subordinates trusted him deeply.

"Thanks for the offer, but I already have plans."

Junya had been out drinking with Fujiyama several times. They always had a good time together, but this time he had to refuse.

"Oh, that's too bad." Fujiyama's face fell, but he didn't insist. "Is this previous engagement with a woman?"

Junya's eyes widened momentarily at this. He hadn't expected Fujiyama to ask him about his personal life. Fujiyama grinned at Junya's expression.

"I'll leave that up to your fruitful imagination."

"Not going to brag, huh? I bet I can get it out of you the next time we go drinking, though."

"I look forward to your efforts."

They wrapped up their light banter, and Junya left the bank.

"Now I'm going to be late." Checking the time on his watch, Junya ran to the subway station and pushed into the crowded train at the platform. He rested his weight against the closed doors, carving out a place for

himself amongst the crush of passengers. He took out his cell phone and replied to Uzuki's message.

Just left work, going to be late. Sorry. -J

He was usually a quick typist, but he was so worked up that it took a while to write even that short message.

He checked for mistakes, confirmed the address, and made sure everything was exactly right before pressing the *send* button. His message would reach Uzuki long before he got to the place where they were supposed to meet.

Junya wished he could zip to Uzuki's side along with his message. But that was impossible. All he could do was hope that his yearning to be with Uzuki as soon as he could would reach him through the message.

He slipped the phone back into his jacket pocket as his eyes scanned the inside of the car, searching for something to distract himself with. The words he saw scrolling across the news screen caught him by surprise.

"Koryu Alliance Locked in Battle with Hisakata Clan."

The Koryu Alliance was a gang that operated in the Kabuki-cho red-light district in Tokyo's Shinjuku ward. They controlled adult entertainment establishments, bars, and restaurants. Junya didn't know what else they did behind the scenes.

Their current leader was Shozo Kobayakawa, the father of the man to whom Junya had just sent his message: his lover, Uzuki Kobayakawa.

Junya had met Uzuki in high school. They were

different in every way, from the worlds in which they lived to their value systems. Regardless, they had been attracted to one another, and had fallen in love.

Once, Uzuki had tried to ignore all the obstacles that lay between them. He had chosen to abandon it all and run away with Junya.

Their lives had been turned upside down by their absolute love for each other. Uzuki had thought that they could cut their ties to both their worlds and escape together. He had thought his dark world would allow it.

But Junya couldn't do it.

The gulf between Junya, who had been raised in an ordinary family, and Uzuki, the heir to a gang, was bigger than Junya had imagined. The reality had been harsher than he had expected and, after catching only the slightest glimpse of Uzuki's world, Junya had fled from it.

He betrayed Uzuki, who had loved and believed in him.

But last year, eight years after all that, they had been miraculously reunited. Uzuki had put on a tough act, but Junya had seen through it, knowing deep down that Uzuki loved him more than anyone else in the world.

Junya was a bank employee and Uzuki was a gangster. Just like nine years before, their worlds and their positions in those worlds were very different. But Junya had chosen now to be with Uzuki, fully aware of those differences. They loved and cherished each other, just as they had when they were teenagers. Back then, Junya didn't see anything in their feelings or relationship

that was different from ordinary lovers, and still didn't.

But when Uzuki's men had interfered with their escape nine years ago, Junya had unexpectedly been forced to realize the truth: with Uzuki, even if everything seemed safe, things could change drastically in an instant.

Junya waited for the train to arrive at Shinjuku station. As soon as the doors opened, he flew out and ran toward the stairs. He slipped through the congested ticket gates, flagged down a cab, and set off for the hotel.

It wasn't very far to walk and normally he would have, but right now he was desperate to see Uzuki, even if it was only one minute—or even one second—sooner.

In the cab, he quickly typed out another message. He knew that calling would be faster, but if Uzuki was sleeping Junya didn't want to disturb him.

In Shinjuku, coming by taxi. Be right there. -J

Only five minutes left until nine o'clock.

The taxi rolled through the maze of streets until Junya stood before the entrance to the hotel at exactly nine o'clock.

No matter how often he came to this luxury hotel, which stood among the skyscrapers of Shinjuku, Junya always felt intimidated.

"Welcome, sir."

But today he didn't have time for that. Junya nodded to the doorman, who welcomed him inside with a refined gesture, and hurried into the hotel.

He couldn't stand still while waiting for the elevator.

He didn't need to ask reception for Uzuki's room

number: he had it memorized. It would be the same corner suite on the forty-fifth floor that he always used. Apparently Uzuki also had an apartment in Nishi-Azabu, but he only saw Junya at the hotel.

There was a brief sensation of weightlessness before the doors opened onto the forty-fifth floor, and Junya bolted down the carpeted hallway.

He was almost there. Just a little further and he would see Uzuki. The very thought made his heart pound and his cheeks flush.

It was always like this when he saw Uzuki.

Even when they saw each other several days in a row, parting was always difficult and their next meeting would seem impossibly far away. And since he had become especially busy at work lately, Junya usually couldn't see Uzuki. That had made the wait this time seem even more impossibly distant.

He stopped outside the door of Uzuki's room.

Sweat had gathered on his forehead after all his running and his hair had fallen across his face. He combed it back into place, using the moment to calm himself.

"I hope I look all right," he mumbled. This was his ritual before visiting Uzuki. He calmed his raging emotions and put a smile on his face.

Then, with slightly trembling fingers, he pushed the intercom button.

After a brief silence, an irritated voice called out, "Who is it?"

"It's me. I'm sorry I'm late, I—"

Before he could finish, he heard a phone clatter

violently to the ground. The lock turned and the door swung open.

Uzuki peered out at him. His hair had fallen across his face.

The moment Junya's eyes met Uzuki's intense stare, a shiver ran through his body.

"I meant to get here sooner, but something came up at work," Junya hurried to apologize, looking up at Uzuki's face. His eyes traveled over that handsome, fearless face, down to the thick neck and to the toned muscles of his lover's chest. Even now, in February, his skin was still tanned and healthy, which suited his fierce glinting eyes and wide, rugged mouth.

He was proportioned like a model, his slender but muscular torso covered by a white shirt. His body caught even the gazes of other men. A gold chain glittered against the healthy brown of his chest.

"Why're you just standing there?" Uzuki looked dubiously at Junya, brushing the hair off his forehead in annoyance.

Junya only stared at him. "I know I've said it before, but I was just thinking how hot you are."

"Gimme a break." Uzuki grabbed Junya's arm and dragged him into the room. Before Junya realized what was happening, Uzuki's other hand had pulled his hips against Uzuki's. Looking up, all he could see was Uzuki's face.

"Uzuki..."

Uzuki's lips pressed against Junya's. Tangling their tongues together, Junya tasted the beer and tobacco that Uzuki loved so much. "Mm." For a brief moment,

he had trouble breathing through the intense kiss. A groan escaped him as his tongue moved in its practiced dance.

Uzuki's tongue stimulated the roof of his mouth, running behind his teeth. His sweet caresses enflamed Junya's fervor. This impassioned, tenacious kiss lit a fire deep inside Junya.

Without even being touched, the desire between his legs gathered force and began to make its presence known between their bodies. The same was happening to Uzuki. Uzuki was wearing leather pants which showed a clear outline of the pulsing object inside them, which was steadily growing harder.

Uzuki rubbed his engorged member against Junya through their clothes. A shudder pounded through Junya, inciting a perverse pleasure deep within him.

"Ahh...mm."

Uzuki held the back of Junya's head, gripping his feathery hair. Their lips were deeply pressed together and Junya lost himself in the idea that Uzuki was seizing every breath he took.

Several times Junya felt his knees weaken and his body begin to fall. But Uzuki caught him each time, holding him up effortlessly with only one hand. Junya searched for some support to cling to, eventually circling his arms around Uzuki's shoulders.

The first time he'd had sex with Uzuki had been in high school. After that, during their time apart, Junya had never slept with another man. Not until he was reunited with Uzuki did he open his body to a man again.

For Junya, Uzuki was his first man and would be

his last. Riding the wave of pleasure that rose to fill his brain, Junya knew it from his core.

Of course, he didn't have abundant experience with women, either. It was probably on the low side considering his age. But he wasn't asexual. It was just that ever since he'd met Uzuki, and while they were separated, Junya had never felt the urge to join his body with anyone at all.

Ever since he was reunited with Uzuki, Junya had been surprised by the strength of his lust. This time, after only two weeks apart, he had swollen to readiness with just this kiss. And he couldn't wait much longer.

He only felt ashamed of his reaction for the briefest moment. His brain was boiling during this fervent exchange of kisses and his mind was a blank except for Uzuki.

Uzuki knew what this was doing to Junya and still did almost nothing but kiss him.

All he did was press his warm erection against Junya and bring him higher and higher with his intense, skillful kisses.

Junya groaned. "Give it to me."

He saw flames burning deep in Uzuki's eyes as they gazed at each other between kisses. Those flames were Uzuki himself.

Junya knew that they were hot, and that if he touched them he would get burned; but the warmth of the flames drew him in and he reached out to them. Uzuki was that sort of man. Even knowing he would get burnt, Junya couldn't help being drawn to him.

Uzuki licked the inside of his mouth irresistibly



until Junya felt the root of his tongue going numb. His fingertips stretched out to trace a line down Junya's neck, captivating Junya, who followed Uzuki's hand, gently capturing it with his own and bringing it to his lips.

Uzuki still said nothing. He only looked straight into Junya's eyes. Uzuki darted his tongue out to the tips of his fingers and licked over the nails before slowly placing them inside Junya's mouth. Holding his fingers gently inside, he allowed Junya to caress them with tongue and teeth.

The slurping noise Junya made tickled Junya's ears. The sound drove him as high as his actions.

"You're an expert now, huh?"

Uzuki reached out for his chin, raising it sharply. Slipping his fingers from Junya's mouth, Uzuki traced them once more down Junya's neck.

The warm, slippery sensation trailing over his skin sent a shudder down Junya's spine. His face tightened and Uzuki smiled at the sight.

"Junya—"

Taking his sweet whisper as an invitation, Junya wrapped his arms around Uzuki's body and let himself be pushed slowly backwards onto the bed.

Straddling Junya's body as it sank into the yielding springs, Uzuki stripped off his own shirt as he kissed Junya, then began loosening the knot of Junya's tie with practiced hands. He slipped it out from Junya's collar and began unbuttoning his shirt. Halfway through, he pulled Junya's shirt out from his belt and slid his hands up under it.

"Uzuki—"

"You're sweating."

His large palms skidded over Junya's skin. As if enjoying the sensation, he continued sweeping them over his torso, gradually moving higher. Once in a while, the gold chain around his neck swung down to brush over Junya's skin, giving him a chill.

"It's hot in here."

"Then maybe you should take all these stuffy clothes off." Uzuki's wide mouth cut his face into an evil grin.

"Would you take them off for me?"

There was nothing to be gained from being stubborn now. Junya's submissive request brought Uzuki's satisfied hands back to circling under his shirt, brushing over the nipples of his flat chest.

"I'm going to have a little fun before that."

Uzuki's long fingers pinched one of Junya's nipples, already hard, pulling on it sharply. The maddening sensation tensed his entire body and made his hips jump from the bed.

"What was that? Something that small excites you?"

Junya was already biting his lip as Uzuki's fingers drove him closer to his limits. He was already hard just from being caressed, and when Uzuki's fingers stimulated his nipple, he grew even harder.

"Ah—"

"How does that feel?"

Trailing his fingers over Junya's skin, Uzuki touched the other nipple. That one too had grown hard

from the feel of his shirt rubbing across it, begging for attention.

"Would you like it better if I rubbed them?"

Uzuki crushed Junya's nipples under his fingers as he asked the question.

"No!"

"So you want me to pull them?"

"Ow!"

The feeling of Uzuki's nails biting into the sensitive nubs was enough to send a wave of pleasure coursing through Junya's body.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?"

When Junya shook his head, Uzuki dragged his nails across his nipples. A feeling like an electric current shot through his entire body, his knees thrashed and his hips rose from the bed.

"You weren't being honest. And how about this?"

Descending over Junya's body, Uzuki opened the front of his shirt and bit down on his chest.

"No, stop!"

The sensation of his sharp teeth and warm breath sent Junya sailing. Try as he might to resist, he couldn't. He was growing painfully hard.

"You told me it felt good when I did this, right?"

Uzuki pressed his knee against the bulge that rested between Junya's open legs.

"No—no, stop—"

"I can't hear you."

Junya tried to sit up suddenly, but Uzuki pushed him back down easily. "I guess I'm going to have to teach Junya how to be a good boy."



“Ngh—”

Uzuki spoke with his teeth still on Junya's nipple, stimulating him. His teeth, his tongue, his breath—they all combined to produce a sensation that had already risen so high that, seeking a release, his desire had begun to turn to frustration.

Uzuki could tell. Forced to such heights, trapped inside his pants, Junya was so obviously hard.

But Uzuki didn't touch his lower body, continuing to focus on Junya's chest. Strongly, tenderly, cruelly, forcefully; again and again pleasure rose up in Junya until he felt like he was losing his mind.

“S-stop, I—ah!”

His member twitched, pressing against Uzuki's knee. Even so harshly restrained, he could still feel the hot, swelling pressure building up.

And it wasn't just happening there. Deeper, far inside the cleft between his buttocks, he was growing warmer, yearning for the stimulation he had received so many times before from this man.

His muscles contracted again and again, twitching endlessly. Now fully swollen, Junya could feel every tiny cell pulsing, ripe for more.

The flesh swelled, opening like the petals of a blooming flower, waiting for that moment to come.

Impatient, Junya reached down to touch himself. But Uzuki saw this immediately and caught his hand.

“Uzuki—”

“Do you remember what I told you before?”

“Uh-huh.”

Uzuki pressed his warm lips against Junya's

trapped hand. He licked it, then clamped his teeth onto it. Junya shivered at the things Uzuki did against the back of his hand and his underwear slowly grew wetter.

“You have to tell me what you want, and then I'll do it.”

His hot breath swept across Junya's hand to swirl gently against the skin of his chest. Junya could feel each of his skin cells tingle; even such a slight sensation did not escape them.

Junya's body was preparing itself for Uzuki.

And not just his body: passion had invaded his mind as well. He had a vision of spreading his legs wide. He wanted Uzuki to thrust his searing desire into that part of Junya that awaited him. He wanted Uzuki to fill him with pleasure, to overwhelm all his reason.

“Junya.”

Uzuki's lips pressed into Junya's hand, then brushed Junya's lips.

Junya's hips began to move by themselves, inspired by the deep pleasure swelling within him. He bent his legs and snaked his hands down to Uzuki's groin. Junya swallowed thickly as he felt the obvious excitement of the man's organ through his clothes.

He was on fire. And he was starving.

“I want—”

His voice was strained to its limit, surprisingly hoarse as he spoke.

“What?”

At Uzuki's cruel question, Junya stole a demure glance and swallowed again. He was already completely dominated.

If he had to wait any longer, he would go crazy.

"I want you."

"What part of me?" Uzuki whispered, nibbling on Junya's earlobe as he pressed his hips against Junya's. He traced the curve of Junya's ear with his lips and thrust his tongue inside it. A joy almost like pain penetrated Junya's body, running down to his hips, and he gave a wordless cry.

His skin was alive with sensation, sucked up by Uzuki's palm as it skimmed over him. Uzuki's heartbeat pounded loudly beside Junya's ear, as if his body were crying out.

The last time Junya had been touched was two weeks ago. That day too they had had such passionate sex that Junya had felt faint afterwards. And the time before that, and the time before that, more times than Junya could even count. But no matter how often they had sex, he never got tired of it.

Even after saying the same words so many times, it still took courage to give voice to his desires. Casting off his burning shame, Junya focused his emotions as best he could and said it, without desperation.

"I want your cock."

He knew how happy it made Uzuki to hear him say that.

A broad grin came over Uzuki's face and he held Junya with all the tenderness he possessed, pressing fervent kisses onto him almost painfully.

They didn't know each other well enough to communicate without words. Though they loved each other, they felt insecure and wanted to say it aloud to

make it real.

But of course words alone weren't enough.

That was why they came together like this every time they saw each other; so intensely that they could barely catch a stray breath, each reveling in the heat and passion of the other, trying to destroy their anxieties.

Junya accepted Uzuki's petty requests because he knew they were honest.

This man who acted so arrogant and overbearing was nervous, just like Junya. His constant requests for Junya to express himself while he subjugated Junya with sex came from those feelings of uneasiness.

Even if they acted it out differently, they both felt the same way. Uzuki was only nervous because he loved Junya; and that insecurity demanded constant reassurance.

"Junya..."

As Uzuki breathed Junya's name, the movement of his hands became more urgent. He pulled Junya's shirt off of his torso and roughly exposed his lower body. Junya's passion trickled from the tip of his member from the merest touch of air on his skin. It glistened obscenely in the light.

Uzuki's fingers closed around Junya's shaft; his hand ran over it with careful tenderness. At the same time, Uzuki pulled out his own member from his pants.

No matter how many times he saw it, Junya was always so impressed at the sight of Uzuki's cock that he swallowed unconsciously. The tip of his member bobbed, as if searching its surroundings.

Junya's legs trembled at this movement, which

seemed to be mocking the panting folds of his flesh.

"Uzuki—"

I want it now.

Junya tilted his hips up, begging for it; but although Uzuki had his fingers around him, he only teased around the edge of his slit with his thumb.

The play of his thumb and the soft scrape of its nail sent lewd convulsions through Junya, his body twitching. But it wasn't enough. He wanted something hot and hard inside of him.

"You're whimpering."

Junya nodded meekly.

It would do no good to act like he was above begging for it now. Once he'd revealed how much he wanted Uzuki, everything had been exposed.

"Please, Uzuki...I want you inside of me."

It took all he had to wring these words out of himself.

Uzuki darted his tongue out to lick Junya. Just seeing his tongue move like that was so obscene that a shudder coursed down Junya's back. Even the first time they'd had sex, Uzuki had been talented. And hiding behind his powerful act, Junya had seen how desperate Uzuki was not to hurt him.

Eight years later, after their reunion, sex with Uzuki had been completely different.

In the beginning, the things he'd had to do to receive physical pleasure—following Uzuki's orders—had been shameful. Dominated by a mind that knew his weaknesses inside and out, Junya's pride had been wrung out of him along with his desire.

For Junya, eight years had been a miserably long time. But his body had always retained a clear memory of Uzuki.

The immoral sensation of being controlled and dominated by the man he had once betrayed excited Junya. He had endured rough sex, and not entirely against his will.

But during that time, Uzuki was never truly violent with him. He drove Junya higher with his words and body and antagonized Junya until he thought he would lose his mind, but Uzuki had never hit him.

His touch was always tender on Junya's skin.

Even now that the two men knew they were truly in love with each other, sex with Uzuki was still basically the same. The only thing that had changed was that Junya was no longer alone in his understanding of the excitement he got from sex. Uzuki understood it, too.

And exciting Junya obviously excited Uzuki. When he touched Junya's hardness, Uzuki grew hard as well.

Forcing Junya to speak his desires, and being just a little rough showed Uzuki how much Junya loved him and how far Junya was willing to let him go. Though he looked so strong, this man had a fragile heart, more delicate than anyone else Junya knew. Uzuki only let Junya see glimpses of that part of himself.

That made Junya almost painfully happy. He wanted to give himself to Uzuki even more. He was sure Uzuki would be angry if he ever mentioned it, but when Junya saw that Uzuki showed his vulnerable side to him

alone, he felt something maternal rising up within him, something that he never would have imagined himself capable of.

"Junya."

Uzuki spoke his name, his hand cupping Junya's cheek. His other hand moved under his knee, pushing his legs open.

Uzuki's manhood pressed against the tightness of Junya's opening. The tip was amazingly dense, pushing its way inside as if it were digging into him. Junya's breath caught at the sensation.

"Do you feel it, Junya?" Uzuki asked in a low voice. "I'm inside you." He gazed at Junya through half-closed eyes and Junya nodded several times, dazed.

"It's so warm inside you."

"Ah!"

Junya felt his flesh suddenly give and Uzuki slid further inside. It only hurt at the beginning. The uncomfortable sensation of the bulky, hot hardness moving inside him soon turned to pleasure and gradually to passion.

"Am I warm, too?"

There was a slight ache—friction—Uzuki's scent...the warmth of Uzuki's hand on his skin, and then sweat.

"You are." They shared everything and it all transformed into pleasure inside Junya. "You're so warm, Uzuki."

Junya circled his arms around Uzuki's back. He followed the wild pounding of Uzuki's hips with devotion. The red-hot passion of Uzuki's body seemed

to be driving deeper and deeper into his body. Suddenly, Uzuki pulled out of him. Junya's muscles convulsed tightly in protest and then Uzuki thrust into him once again.

"Ah! Nngh!"

"Feel it...Your body belongs to me, Junya. Every part of it!"

Junya's ripened flesh embraced Uzuki's unpredictable moves. The heat that welled up from that part of him, dirty and wet with his excitement, only fed his lust.

"I'm close, Uzuki—"

"Close to what? You have to tell me, Junya."

Uzuki stabbed into his flesh, leaning so hard against Junya's body that his knees were pressed into Uzuki's chest. He dove into the deepest depths, stimulating the weakness he found there, and a sweet tenderness spread through Junya's body.

"You—you're coming. Oh, God!"

His mind flashed pure white and he lost all sense of the world. The sensation that seeped through the deepest reaches of his body twisted around every aspect of his consciousness.

"Feel it, Junya!"

"Aah—!"

Uzuki's body pushed far into his own and a moment later, Junya's lower body, swelling with excitement, exploded. The passion sliding between their bellies welled up and the heat deep inside Junya's body flashed into release.

Uzuki's hardness pressed momentarily deeper

into Junya's body, then gradually softened into his flesh. He released Junya's legs and slowly trusted his weight to Junya. Their skin pressed together, steeped in their sweat, as their hearts beat against each other's bodies.

A feeling of utter satisfaction filled Junya.

"Junya," Uzuki said, between breaths made rough with the overexertion of his lust. He gazed into Junya's face, his gentle eyes smiling. When Uzuki looked at him, his eyes were always filled with affection. As long as Uzuki looked at him like that, no matter what else might happen, Junya would always know that he was loved.

They pressed their lips together in a light kiss, reaffirming their feelings for each other.

"Mm—"

Uzuki's bulk pulsed again inside Junya's body. Junya's own member twitched, despite its exhaustion only a moment ago.

"You still want more?" Uzuki's hand ran over Junya's organ. A smile lifted his lips and Junya felt slightly embarrassed.

"You're just asking because you want it," Junya said, trying to sound tough. The place that held them together grew warm again.

"You're so easy." Uzuki kissed him gently on the cheek.

"Only because you're such a pervert."

That wouldn't be enough for Uzuki, so Junya returned his kiss. Gazing into each other's eyes, a small laugh escaped them.

Junya knew it wasn't enough. He wanted to keep

going until they melted into each other, until he didn't know where his body ended and Uzuki's began. For that, they would need to be together many more times and know each other's bodies much more intimately.

Junya wrapped his legs around Uzuki's hips, deepening their connection. "I want more," he said, biting Uzuki's earlobe sweetly. Shocked by Junya's flirtation, Uzuki shuddered faintly, the part of him inside Junya swelling greatly. "Junya—"

"Did you like that?"

Junya felt himself getting caught up in the excitement, too. He glanced up at Uzuki's face out of the corner of his eye, watching him fight to deny the pleasure he felt. Uzuki raised his eyebrows and stared awkwardly into Junya's face.

"I don't judge you for getting excited by a little thing like that."

"You jerk." Uzuki grinned, knowing Junya was teasing him. He pulled his hips back.

"Ah!" It was Junya's turn to cry out.

"Let's see how you react to *this*."

Uzuki quickly thrust back into him.

"A—ah! Nngh—uhh!"

Uzuki's hard organ plunged in and out of him. Junya had no time to adjust. It rubbed in and against him, pushing his pleasure ever upwards and making his member well with fluid. His mind couldn't follow the transformation of his body.

"Ah!"

A stream of panting breaths slipped through his half-open lips. Uzuki stretched his tongue out to Junya's

mouth, forcing his way inside. "I'm coming—I can't hold it, Uzuki!"

"Then come as hard as you want."

Junya matched the pounding of Uzuki's hips with his own. Uzuki thrust painfully inside; Junya squeezed him painfully tight. It seemed as if the two could come no closer until they suddenly surged together to the end.

"Uzuki!" Junya cried out, before his consciousness snapped.

"Junya—!"

Junya screamed. His body convulsed and warmth spread through him. The feeling of the swollen object faded, and lethargy spread throughout his entire body as he emerged on the other side of his second climax.

Climbing into the bath, Junya felt the pleasantly warm water heal his body to its very core. He sank into the bathtub.

Uzuki had carried him there. The bathtub was big enough for two adult men to stretch their legs out in front of them, and it was so full of bubbles that their bodies were obscured in the water.

There was a faint scent of roses.

No matter how often they had sex, it still took courage to take a bath together.

There was no time to examine each other's naked bodies during sex. But when they were in the bath together, they were both disturbingly cool-headed.

Even though Junya knew that Uzuki would stare at his body, it still gave him pause since they were both

men. It embarrassed him to be so entirely exposed, but there was also a part of him that got excited knowing that Uzuki was looking at him.

Relaxing in the hot water, Junya felt himself dozing off. Uzuki's voice suddenly startled him back awake. "Are you okay?"

He looked worried, peering down at Junya over his shoulder.

"I'd be lying if I said I was totally fine."

Uzuki frowned at Junya's words.

"But I wanted it, too."

Junya rested his hands on Uzuki's, whose arms were wrapped around his chest. Suddenly one of Uzuki's hands moved down Junya's body, finding his organ beneath the clouds of white bubbles.

"Uzuki!"

"That was just so cute."

Uzuki's long fingers toyed with him beneath the water, teasing him. All he did was stroke the skin around Junya's member, which produced ambiguous sensations. But the tiny stimulations built up in his hips.

"You want to do it again, don't you?"

Resting his chin in the hollow of Junya's shoulder, Uzuki's warm breath tickled his earlobe. His member was positioned against Junya's buttocks and Junya could already feel it rearing its head.

"Oh!"

Uzuki's fingers slipped around his lower body, reaching for the cleft in the soft hills of his buttocks. A single digit was swallowed up by that part of Junya which not too long ago had welcomed Uzuki inside.

"Stop it—"

"But I'm not doing anything. You're the one who sucked my finger in like that."

His hot breath tickled Junya's earlobe.

"It's twitching, telling me that one finger isn't enough. You can feel it too, can't you?"

"Nnh—no!"

Uzuki pushed another finger in despite Junya's protest, spreading him open. Hot water instantly flooded into him.

"Ow! Stop!"

"Relax. I'm not going to put it in. But we have to clean you up inside. It's bad for you if we don't." Uzuki's fingers poked at the supple flesh inside Junya, his nails dragging, in direct contrast to his claims of disinterest.

"Nngh!"

Junya lifted his hips, trying to get away, but Uzuki moved first. With his fingers still inside, he raised Junya's hips and pushed him onto all fours inside the tub.

"Can you feel my fingers inside you?"

"Don't move them!"

Junya knew that his member was hard again, firmly erect under the water.

"But if I don't move them, I can't make you clean inside."

Uzuki's chest pressed against Junya's back. Junya felt the strong pulse of Uzuki's heart and the warmth of his body, and it excited him beyond all reason. They had already climaxed twice in bed. Junya thought he would've been exhausted by now. But after only the

barest of touches, his body was ready for more.

Uzuki's fingers weren't enough; Junya wanted that part of him that now rubbed against his thigh.

"Uzuki—"

Lowering his head in shame, Junya's face sank to the water.

"What?"

"Please."

"You're not going to ask me to take my fingers out, right?" He pressed a kiss into the nape of Junya's neck.

Junya couldn't take any more. He tensed his knees, fighting against their desire to collapse, and turned to look behind him.

"Give it to me," he begged.

Uzuki smiled slyly.

Two hours later, Junya was finally released from Uzuki's arms.

He was utterly exhausted. The two were dressed only in bathrobes and faced each other across a table Uzuki had brought over to the bed.

Junya had ordered onion soup from room service. It was hard to stay upright and after a few bites, Junya fell back onto the bed. Uzuki was in high spirits and, although he'd been drinking before Junya arrived, he made himself a cocktail and snacked on a beef entrée he had ordered.

"You don't want any?" Uzuki turned to look at Junya, as if he'd just remembered he was there.

"Not right now."

"That's why you don't have any stamina."

Junya couldn't deny that, but it wasn't exactly his fault that it was so difficult to sit upright at the moment. He rolled his head to glare at Uzuki, who didn't seem to notice.

Sulking wouldn't change anything, so Junya sighed and sat up, picking up a spoon.

"Eat up." Uzuki thrust a forkful of meat into his face. It was high-quality thick meat, covered in a hearty sauce.

"That's okay. If I wanted some, I would have ordered my own."

"I said eat up."

Junya frowned. He had absolutely no appetite, but Uzuki wasn't taking the food back. He opened his mouth and Uzuki popped the meat inside.

"Mm." He thought he tasted garlic and onions, and also a powerful hint of fruit. The robust taste excited his appetite and he realized how hungry he was.

"Is it good?"

Junya stared up at Uzuki through his eyelashes. He couldn't deny that it had been wonderful, so he nodded hesitantly.

"I know, I totally love this food—I get it all the time. Here, you can have the whole thing. Come on now, open wide."

Uzuki hurriedly cut the meat into small pieces. He smiled in an innocent, childlike fashion as he held the food out to Junya, like a mother hen.

"I can feed myself, you know."



"Don't be shy. I'm sure your arms are still tired. Here, eat."

Uzuki looked truly happy to be doing this, so Junya submitted to it. He waited for each piece of meat to come to him, mouth open wide. He tried to think of something to talk about, but nothing came to him.

Uzuki didn't like talking to him about his work, and when Junya talked to him about his job, Uzuki would get annoyed and tell him not to talk about other men when he was with him.

Junya considered discussing their hobbies; but then realized that he didn't know what Uzuki did in his spare time.

But that wasn't all. Junya actually knew very little about Uzuki. What kind of food he liked, his hobbies—if he had any—all a blank. He knew Uzuki's favorite brand of cigarettes, cologne, and beer. And he knew about his body. How to have sex with him.

Junya's cheeks burned at the thought.

He was shocked that the mere thought of Uzuki's naked body made him ache, despite the fact that he had finally been released from the man's attentions, which had threatened to go on forever. Besides, they were eating.

Looking up, he saw Uzuki leaning his elbows on the table, beaming at him. Junya felt embarrassed under his gaze and hurriedly looked back down. Uzuki slowly reached out to lift Junya's face with a large hand. He jerked back instinctively, looking annoyed, and wiped Junya's mouth off with his fingertips. He held his fingers out in front of Junya. They were covered in sauce.

"Oh—"

Uzuki brought his fingers to his own mouth and licked them off. The movement of his tongue reminded Junya of their recent activities and his hips ached.

"Next weekend there's some stuff I have to take care of, so I won't be able to see you." Uzuki wiped his fingers off on a napkin.

"All right."

"I'm sorry."

Uzuki hunched his shoulders.

Junya knew that Uzuki wouldn't tell him what was going on, so he didn't bother to ask.

"It doesn't make up for it, but are you free on Thursday?"

"If I don't have to work late." Junya didn't know what Uzuki was getting at, so he gave a noncommittal answer.

"Then just work extra hard all week so you don't have to. I'm giving you plenty of notice here. And if you ever get tired of working, you know I'm willing to take care of you."

"That's an awfully selfish thing to say." Junya bristled as soon as this taboo topic came up. "Maybe in a regular job you can get ahead of things by working harder, but I don't know if I'll have overtime until the day I have to do it."

"Don't get upset."

"It's your fault." Junya didn't want to be angry. But this irritated him the same way being called "Kobayakawa's bitch" did.

They were supposed to be equals.

Junya didn't say anything about Uzuki's job, so in return Junya didn't want Uzuki to say anything about his. He didn't want to be taken care of and he didn't want to be someone's bitch. He wanted to be with Uzuki, walking beside him as an equal human being.

"I'm sorry," Uzuki mumbled. "The truth is, there's this great Japanese steakhouse called Sankaitei in Hachioji. They just opened a branch in Shinjuku, so we had to get involved in it. When I went by to pay them a visit I tried some of their food. It was pretty good! The place has a nice atmosphere, too. I wanted to take you there."

"Really?"

Uzuki continued, sounding embarrassed. "Things have been hectic lately, so we can't make plans to have a nice meal together at a restaurant. Even when we do see each other, it's always in hotels. I've been wanting to treat you to good food every once in a while, and I think Thursday would work for me." He paused to light a cigarette, then turned to look at Junya as he slowly exhaled the smoke.

"Are you sure you can't juggle your schedule? It's really amazing. I'm not picky about what I eat, so I think it's good anyway, but I know you'll be able to tell how good it is."

"You know what you like, though."

Uzuki only ate things that could be called gourmet. He was really pulling out all the stops to convince Junya.

Uzuki usually acted tough, but when he revealed his weaknesses, he could have turned any woman to jelly.

Junya analyzed Uzuki objectively. He wasn't a woman, but Uzuki's unexpected arguments and behavior often penetrated Junya's heart.

That was what made Junya realize just how much he loved Uzuki.

"Come on,"

"Fine."

"Really?" Uzuki's face shone.

"I'm not making any promises, but I'll try to make some time for it."

"Awesome. I'll be waiting for you at eight o'clock at Number Five. The steakhouse stays open pretty late, so if you've got to work you can just call me at the bar. I'll wait there and have some beer. And you have to try your best to finish all your work." Uzuki excitedly arranged all the details.

"Uzuki."

When Junya said his name, Uzuki looked at him tenderly. Junya was hardly an adolescent girl, but Uzuki's gaze seemed to clamp invisible jaws around his heart.

"Yeah?"

"Are you all right?"

Normally, Junya would never have dared to touch on the subject, but the news flash he'd seen in the subway bothered him.

"Huh?"

Uzuki evaded the question, rubbing out the butt of his cigarette in an ashtray. He stood up slowly and took hold of Junya's arm. The feel of Uzuki's warmth on Junya's skin made his heart pound.

"Just answer the question. I'm really worried about you, Uzuki."

"If you're worried about my health, don't bother. I ate real well and now I'm ready for another round."

Uzuki had already thrown Junya back onto the bed as he spoke. He easily untied the sash knotted around Junya's waist and exposed the front of his body. Junya knew he was just avoiding the conversation, but if he acknowledged that Uzuki didn't want to talk about it, he couldn't bring it up again. It was an unspoken rule.

So Junya looked into Uzuki's face and smirked. "Didn't you get enough already?"

"No. We only did it three times. I want to savor you until dawn," Uzuki grinned, the smell of alcohol, tobacco, and meat on his lips growing stronger as their faces drew closer together.

"Uzuki—"

Dawn was still a long way away.

Chapter Two

Kabuki-cho in Shinjuku is a world-renowned entertainment area. Shops stained with the lurid light of neon signs were everywhere in this place of mingling ages, professions, and nationalities. One side street in particular housed a long row of porn shops with photos of topless women plastered on billboards, uncomfortably conspicuous everywhere.

"Want to give our girls a try, my man? Only the best."

Junya answered these incessant calls with an ambiguous smile and a quick escape. True, Junya was a healthy young man and it was impossible to say that he had *no* interest in the offers. But the flamboyant neon didn't attract him.

His former boss had loved places like this. It was during one of the excursions this boss had dragged him along on that Junya had been reunited with Uzuki.

Junya knew that if he hadn't gone with his boss that night, he probably would never have seen Uzuki again. But that didn't mean he liked going to these places, even if Uzuki himself owned them.

Uzuki had taken Junya to many other similar places after that. Junya knew he looked unhappy, and that this made extra work for Uzuki. The girls always flocked to Uzuki since he was the owner. They flirted

with their good-looking manager, heady with cheap perfume. Junya always felt repulsed as he watched these women suck up to Uzuki, snuggling against him as if it were natural.

Uzuki easily ignored their sultry, immodest behavior. He grabbed them by their slender waists without a second thought, and laid kisses on the backs of their white hands or kissed the thick lipstick on their mouths. He didn't seem the least bit daunted even when Junya was right there watching.

Of course, their relationship was a secret. Uzuki owned the company that managed a whole segment of Kabuki-cho. He was generous and bold, and Junya knew he had to put on a show. But he couldn't stop something from smoldering deep in his heart. Their relationship was like crossing a precarious bridge, so naturally Junya had imagined what might cause that bridge to break.

He knew if he mentioned this to Uzuki he would just get a quick smile in return, so he never brought it up. He simply buried it deep in his heart.

Junya went through the narrow doorway into the building that housed the cabaret and entered the elevator. There was a loud *clank* and the light inside the elevator went out for a moment. It was an old building, so the wiring was probably unreliable. He reached the fifth floor and, after another loud *clank*, the doors opened.

Junya saw the chocolate-brown door. Written in thin letters in the middle of it were the words, "Number Five." Nothing else was written there; so it was impossible to tell at a glance what sort of business they did.

If Uzuki hadn't told him the bar's name the first

time they were to meet there, Junya doubted he would've had the courage to open the door and go inside.

But now it was different.

The open hallway continued toward an emergency staircase and Junya heard the rowdy noises of Kabuki-cho outside. He heard the voices of drunks, and the sounds of cars and people going by on Yasukuni Boulevard. But the instant Junya passed through the doors, the cacophony disappeared.

"Good evening, sir."

Junya was surprised to hear an unfamiliar voice and looked up quickly.

Normally, there was a gentlemanly-looking bartender with white hair, but standing behind the simply designed real wood bar was a young man in his late twenties.

"Er."

"Is something the matter, sir?" the young man asked, noting Junya's confusion.

"Uh—where's the regular bartender?"

"If you mean the manager, he had to step out for a moment. He should be back in a few hours. I started here two weeks ago," the man answered pleasantly. "Did you have some business with him?"

"No, not really. I just wondered, since he's always here."

Junya pulled out a stool and sat down.

"What'll it be?"

"How about a gin and lime?"

"Coming right up." The young bartender set out a warm hand towel for him, then started on Junya's order.

"Actually, I'm supposed to be meeting someone here. Has anyone else been by?"

"You're the first customer of the night."

"Oh. I see."

Uzuki had told him that Thursday was the only day that might work for meeting up. He must have been very busy. But he hadn't called Junya to say he couldn't make it, so Junya figured that if he just waited a little while, Uzuki would come.

He hardly ever met up with Uzuki in public. But on those rare occasions that they did, they almost always met here. The easy, relaxed atmosphere that the manager created appealed to Junya and he had even come here alone sometimes. The man seemed to know Uzuki well and spoke about him with a tender glint in his eye, as if he were his own son or grandchild. That alone was relaxing.

But the bar's atmosphere changed completely without the bartender.

Junya couldn't relax. He glanced at his watch several times while waiting for Uzuki. He had finished work before seven o'clock, so he had reached the bar ahead of schedule, even without hurrying.

Despite the fact that Uzuki wouldn't even make time to see him this weekend, he had asked Junya to clear some time for him tonight. Lately Junya had been taking a tough attitude with Uzuki's arrogant tone, but inside he was happy. The reason he didn't show it on the outside was that he suspected Uzuki could see straight through him even if he said nothing about it.

"Here you are, sir."

At almost the same moment that the bartender set Junya's cocktail down in front of him, he heard the door open behind him.

Uzuki.

Keeping his bounding heart in check, Junya set his face and turned around. "I thought you said you'd be waiting for *me*. Think you're late enough...?"

Junya's voice trailed off. The person who stood in the doorway wasn't Uzuki. It was a man with short, reddish-brown hair and lightly tinted sunglasses. He was slightly shorter than Uzuki, but was just as strongly built. He might even have been a little brawnier than Uzuki.

Junya spotted a flashy wristwatch on the man's left wrist, which was thrust into the pocket of his close-fitting leather pants. And under the black jacket that covered his upper body, he wore a tight black high-necked shirt. A single dog tag dangled against his chest.

He looked like a thug—it wasn't the nicest word, but it was the first thing Junya thought of. It was a common enough type in Kabuki-cho, but this man's eyes were fiercer. His sharp, almond-shaped eyes, hidden behind the sunglasses, reminded Junya of Uzuki. The first impression he made was perhaps even stronger than the one Uzuki made.

The man frowned at Junya for a moment, then rudely looked him over from head to toe.

After taking a cautious breath, Junya gathered his courage. He stared back at the man, showing no weakness. If he looked away, he would lose.

After all the time he'd spent with Uzuki since high school, Junya had met many men who looked tough. He

had no confidence against such a muscular man, but he had to show guts at least.

"Are you Junya Sawa?"

The man spoke Junya's name, his lips barely moving. His voice had a husky quality to it, making it just as impressive as his appearance.

"Yes."

"Uzuki Kobayakawa sent me. I'm Hayato Inazumi."

"Why did he send you?" Junya frowned, doubt filling his voice.

His relationship with Uzuki was outwardly a secret, but there must have been more than a few people who knew about it.

Of course people inside the Koryu Alliance might know, but Junya couldn't dismiss the possibility that people in rival gangs would know about them, too. One of the reasons Uzuki didn't meet with him in public was to protect Junya from those people.

In fact, Uzuki had already tried to distance himself from Junya out of concern for his safety.

That had happened six months ago.

Uzuki's father, the leader of the Koryu Alliance, had seen his right-hand man assassinated in a conflict between the gangs. In the struggle over Shinjuku that followed, even Uzuki's life had been in danger.

At that time, Uzuki had been deliberately cruel to Junya, trying to cut the ties that pulled them together from the past. But Junya hadn't immediately understood what was going on.

It would be a lie to say Uzuki's behavior didn't



make him want to leave sometimes.

After eight years apart, Uzuki had threatened to release photos of his half-forced sexual acts with Junya to Junya's company, and Junya had let the relationship continue even after that. He hadn't wanted to leave Uzuki eight years before. And his relationships with others had never been equal to what he'd had with Uzuki.

So he had been happy to see Uzuki again, and he couldn't deny the fact that he had felt something that was a far cry from repugnance at resuming their physical relationship.

But from the very beginning, Uzuki forced Junya to have sex that seemed to mock the way he felt. It was empty, only meant to satisfy his lust. Junya was treated like an object. But then he would catch a glimpse of Uzuki's tenderness.

Then Uzuki had said he would release Junya. Junya's ignorance about the situation was finally cleared up by Soichi Iwatsuki, Uzuki's childhood guardian. It was the first time he truly understood Uzuki's feelings.

Iwatsuki told him that during the eight years they'd been apart, Uzuki had felt as if he were living alone in a separate world—just like Junya had. And he also told Junya how reckless Uzuki had been, unable to forget the lover who had left him.

And also how, just like long ago, Uzuki still loved him.

Once he learned how Uzuki felt about him, Junya was unable to leave him.

The consequences of that choice would doubtless be much harsher than anything he imagined. Junya was

probably putting his life in danger. And if he wasn't careful, his presence might even put Uzuki in danger.

But despite these dangers, the fact that Uzuki had come after Junya supported his decision to never leave Uzuki again.

Now, six months later, the man who'd killed their leader's right-hand man was still on the loose. Junya sometimes saw on TV and in the papers that people suspected who the perpetrator was. He'd even seen an article posted in the subway the other day about the incident.

All of which meant that the Koryu Alliance was still at war.

Thanks to Uzuki, nothing had affected Junya yet, but he knew it was only a matter of time. Uzuki had his reasons for suggesting that Junya quit his job and to let Uzuki support him.

If the gang members found out about Junya's relationship with the next in line, his position at the bank would be in danger. And since he was just a regular guy, Uzuki couldn't openly protect him. Just by getting closer to Uzuki, Junya was highlighting the insecurity of his position. He wasn't a woman, so he didn't believe in letting Uzuki completely protect him; but he didn't want his existence to put Uzuki in danger, either.

But he wasn't going to pull away again, like in high school. He wanted to be with Uzuki and to protect him in his own way.

Junya spent a lot of time thinking about how he could do that. He also knew that he was running out of time to come up with an idea.

He sucked in a small breath and stared at the man before him cautiously.

When Uzuki was running late, he always called to tell Junya himself, or sent Iwatsuki to tell him. Why would today be the first time he sent a man Junya didn't recognize? Was it a trap?

"The boss had to take care of some urgent business with Iwatsuki-san. He can't use his phone, so he sent me. He told me to say that he's very sorry, but you two will have to go to the Japanese steakhouse together some other time." The man bowed his head deeply as he spoke.

Hearing this finally relaxed the tension in Junya's mind. The fact that he'd mentioned Iwatsuki's name, and better yet, the fact that he knew about their plans at the steakhouse meant that this guy Inazumi might really be someone Uzuki trusted.

"Thank you."

If Uzuki wasn't coming, Junya would just have to drink alone.

"Excuse me, can I have the bill?" He tossed back what was left of his drink and moved to get up. But before he could, Inazumi sat down beside him and grabbed Junya's hand.

"Hey—"

"Would you mind staying for a little while longer?"

A single shudder ran up Junya's spine at the warmth of the man's hand, larger than Uzuki's and even more powerful.

"Yes?"

"I've heard a lot about you from the boss and Iwatsuki-san, Sawa-san. I've wanted to meet you for a long time. Today I finally have that chance."

Inazumi spoke calmly, belying the flamboyance of his appearance. The gaze he turned on Junya now was nothing like the belligerent look he'd had a moment before.

Calmer now, Junya noticed that Inazumi was a very handsome man.

"You've heard of me?"

"Yeah, like how you've been friends with the boss since high school, where you work. Things like that. Since the boss is going to be the next leader of the Koryu Alliance, he doesn't know a lot of regular people. I think he values having someone like you around."

"Really?" Junya's embarrassment mingled with his relief. Uzuki seemingly trusted Inazumi, but Inazumi didn't seem to know the true nature of their relationship. Apparently he didn't realize they were lovers.

"What'll it be?" The bartender cut in at a good moment to get Inazumi's order, which he gave placidly. "Some Harper's whiskey on the rocks."

Inazumi's hands rested on the bar, giving Junya a full view of the many gaudy rings decorating his fingers. One hand reached into his jacket pocket.

"Do you mind if I smoke?" Inazumi tipped the pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and Junya shook his head. "Would you like one?"

"No, thank you."

"All right."

Bending his head slightly forward, Inazumi lit his

cigarette. White ash fell slowly from the glowing red tip. Inazumi's narrowed eyes followed the rising line of smoke to meet Junya's eyes once more. His eyes seemed to search deep into Junya's soul, making him nervous.

"Have you been with Uzuki—I mean, Kobayakawa-san and Iwatsuki-san a long time?" Junya asked, trying to escape from Inazumi's gaze.

"Yes." Inazumi held his cigarette over the ash tray and flicked off its long line of ash. "They've looked out for me since I was fourteen."

"If you don't mind my asking—"

"I'm twenty-nine."

"Eh?" Junya spoke without thinking. Inazumi didn't look that old at all. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to sound so surprised."

Inazumi didn't look particularly surprised by Junya's reaction.

"No, I know I don't look my age. It's the way I dress. I look like the little punks around here. Iwatsuki-san tells me I should at least dye my hair back to black, but this is the way I want to be, so I stick to my guns." His eyes twinkled.

"I see."

"But the Koryu Alliance and the chief have been looking out for me since I really was a kid. I don't know if you can understand this, since you didn't grow up like us. But for people like me, who've been living on the fringe their whole lives, a man like our leader is like a god."

Inazumi spoke with impassioned emotion.

"He's got influence and he's got guts. Ordinary

people can come to Kabuki-cho to have their work-a-day drink and have some work-a-day fun with the girls because of all the work the chief has done, and because the boss keeps an eye on things."

The man Inazumi called "the chief" was Uzuki's father. Junya had never seen him.

He had never heard Uzuki say anything specific about his father. In high school, Uzuki had tried to blow off his installation as his father's heir, a very important ceremony, in order to run away with Junya. The two didn't live together anymore. Junya suspected that some sort of feud had developed between Uzuki and his father.

But there was no ignoring the fact that Uzuki managed all of Kabuki-cho as the president of the franchise companies under the Koryu Cooperative Industries banner; and that he was being primed to take over as the next leader of the gang.

"The chief keeps insisting on fixing the boss up with someone, which seems to bother him a lot."

Junya looked up in surprise at this unexpected turn in the conversation. His eyes met Inazumi's, who was already staring at him.

Inazumi took off the tinted glasses he was wearing and frowned slightly, as if he'd only just remembered he was wearing them. He had a slanted scar at the corner of his right eye.

"He wants to fix Uzuki up with someone?"

A chill ran down Junya's spine.

"Actually, I can understand how the chief feels. A good-looking guy like Uzuki-sama has to beat the girls

off with a stick. And just between you and me, he has a lot of girls in the finance world and a couple of actresses under his belt."

Junya squeezed his glass in his hands.

"If Uzuki-sama had someone he liked, the chief said there'd be no reason to bother with an arranged marriage; but the boss doesn't want to hear about it. Iwatsuki-san is always with him, and even when he asks the boss about it, he just rants about how he doesn't have anyone in mind and how it's too early for marriage. The chief's getting tired of just looking the other way, so now he's forcing the marriage issue."

Marriage—the word rattled around in Junya's head.

"The girl he has in mind is from another gang that's on good terms with the chief, since she would understand our world. But apparently she went all the way through college just like a normal person, and now she's some business bigwig and a real looker. She seems willing, but the boss..."

Inazumi trailed off.

"Are you married yet, Sawa-san?"

Junya was struck speechless by the unexpected question.

"Er, no—I...I'm still single."

"You must have someone in mind, though?"

Junya fell silent under Inazumi's searching gaze.

"You do. You don't look half bad and you work for a big bank. There's no way you could keep the girls away."

"It's really not like that."

"It's just my opinion, but I think a man is a lot stronger when he's got someone to protect." Inazumi's expression hardened.

"But wouldn't having a family be a liability?" Junya asked dubiously.

"Of course. I won't deny that's true. But having a half-serious girlfriend or a one-night stand is nothing but trouble. It's different with someone that you want to protect with all your heart. That is, the weakness becomes a strength. Since you're worried about putting them in danger, you get more careful, thinking about what effect everything you do would have on them. It makes you responsible."

Inazumi's answer was well considered.

"That's why I think the boss should start a family as soon as possible—for his own sake, of course, but also for the good of the gang. Everyone feels that way."

Behind Uzuki stood all the people of the Kanto Regional Koryu Alliance; and behind them, all the people in the businesses they ran. It was no exaggeration to say that their lives and their livelihoods depended on Uzuki's father, and on Uzuki himself.

Junya felt like this was the first time he truly understood that.

"And I wanted to ask you to talk to him about it, Sawa-san."

"Me?"

"Can you try to convince the boss to just meet the girl?"

"Uh." Junya's heart pounded.

"If we ask him, it makes it seem like we're just

thinking of the good of the gang and don't care how the boss feels. But you have no tie to the gang, so if you tell him it's important to get married and start a family, as a regular guy I think it'll get through to him."

Inazumi's polite, humble argument appealed to Junya's sympathies.

Junya had been treated like a woman by Uzuki, though he had no desire to become one. But now the fact that Junya couldn't openly declare himself to be Uzuki's lover just because he wasn't a woman frustrated him.

"Please, Sawa-san. You don't have to talk to him about it, but if the boss found out I mentioned it to you he would get really upset. So I'd appreciate it if you kept our talk today just between us."

Inazumi stared at Junya earnestly and, unfortunately, Junya lacked the strength, courage, and insight to refuse.

The morning sunlight shone on his face. Opening his heavy eyelids, Junya noticed the light streaming in through a gap in the curtains. He sat up groggily.

He didn't know what time it was, or even what day.

He reached mindlessly for the TV remote control and turned it on. Letting the news flow over him, he figured out what day it was.

"Friday morning." Yesterday was Thursday. He had spent the whole night out, so of course it was Friday now. Finally, comprehension of the natural passage of time returned to him.

But when Junya got out of bed, his head felt like it was going to split in half. He pressed his hands against it. He was hungover. He saw an empty bottle on his table and got depressed.

He remembered Inazumi getting up to leave the night before, saying he had things to take care of. Junya had pretty much trailed off after him out of the bar.

So he'd only had the gin and lime at the bar. But when he'd gotten home, he'd finished off what was left of some brandy he had lying around. The bottle had been a little less than half full, but compared to how much he usually drank that was still a lot.

"Phew."

His breath stank so much of alcohol, Junya thought he might get drunk again.

As he swung himself out of bed, he stepped on something hard. Peering down at the carpet, he saw his cell phone lying on the floor.

It looked like the battery had run out sometime the night before, since the phone didn't respond when he pushed its buttons. Junya had meant to charge it when he got home, but must've forgotten to in the midst of all the drinking.

What if Uzuki had tried to call him? Junya doubted he could have talked to him even if he had called. He was glad the battery had died. Besides, if Uzuki really wanted to get in touch, he could always call his landline. But his phone hadn't rung once after he got home last night.

But maybe Uzuki was just up to his eyeballs in work—he *had* said things were busy.

Junya let that idea reassure him as he dragged his heavy body out of bed and into the shower. Once hot water was pouring down over his head, his eyes began to clear.

He slapped his cheeks, looking at his reflection in the mirror.

"Pull yourself together," he urged himself.

Junya had sworn to face the truth and to keep both feet firmly planted when he examined his future with Uzuki. He had meant to do just that.

It wasn't easy being in love with Uzuki, who belonged to a criminal gang. He was part of a world completely separate from Junya's own. Still, Junya had never been conflicted about his decision to be with him.

But after talking with Inazumi the night before, he couldn't believe how shaken he was in his conviction.

He understood that they were both men. But he believed that at some point his feelings for Uzuki and Uzuki's feelings for him would be able to overcome the barriers of being homosexual.

The reality wasn't so simple.

In reality, there had been several times already when Uzuki had been unable to contact him, just like last night. All he would ever tell Junya the next time they saw each other was that it had been nothing important. So Junya stopped asking.

He knew that Uzuki was running Kabuki-cho. But that wasn't much of an improvement over not knowing where he was or what he was doing when they weren't together. The worst part was that Uzuki didn't seem to want him to know.

Junya knew Uzuki felt that way, so even when he read news articles he never discussed his opinions with Uzuki.

Uzuki thought it was kindness not to say anything and keep Junya from getting embroiled in things. He thought it was only considerate for Junya to not ask him about anything.

But was it really?

When Junya had asked Inazumi if Uzuki had a girlfriend, he hadn't given a clear answer. He'd said he wanted to know in order to help Uzuki, but Junya knew better than anyone that he needed to know for himself.

"I'm such an idiot."

A self-pitying smile came over his face.

He couldn't reveal their relationship to anyone. And since he couldn't reveal it, it only existed inside of him. He believed in it as something enduring.

But his lack of resolve last night, and the fact that he was so shaken by the words of another showed him how flimsy his courage really was.

Junya turned the shower faucet in the other direction and cold water poured over his head. Praying that all the alcohol would be washed out of his system, he stood stoically under the water.

"Are you sick?"

A coworker at the next desk peered at Junya after yet another sneeze.

"I'm sorry, I can't really hear you."

"If you're not feeling well, you should go to

the first aid room and lie down. But wait—you're just hungover, aren't you?"

His coworker frowned slightly.

"You can smell it?" Junya asked.

"No, I didn't even have to get closer to tell. You went drinking on a weeknight? That's not like you."

"I had to drink to kill the pain of my favorite soccer team losing," Junya joked. His coworker raised his eyebrows for a second, then grinned.

"I guess I don't need to worry about you after all, if you can make dumb jokes like that."

"Thanks, though. I'm going to go home after I run these errands, so don't worry."

Junya organized his documents, then picked up his briefcase and jacket and headed into the hallway.

"On your way out?"

Junya ran into Fujiyama, arrayed like himself, in front of the elevators.

"Yes, sir. You, too?"

"I have some business at the main office. Would you like a ride to the station?" Fujiyama asked with his usual smile, dangling his car keys in front of Junya.

"You're driving there yourself?"

"Of course. They don't give managers chauffeurs here, do they? I know they don't at the main office!"

"No, but—you could take a taxi."

"Too much trouble to get one. Anyway, I've got my own car, so there's no reason not to use it." His smile was somehow youthful. Fujiyama got this look on his face sometimes.

They entered the elevator and pushed the buttons

for the first floor and the basement, where the garage was.

"It's too bad about last week. We really should grab a drink together sometime."

Junya turned around and bowed his head gratefully at Fujiyama's invitation.

"I'd like that," he answered, still smelling faintly of alcohol.

Fujiyama cracked a rueful smile. "You're a little hungover today, aren't you?"

"I'm sorry—can you smell it?" Junya took a quick step back and covered his mouth with his hand.

"I just overheard you talking to someone. I'm jealous that your girl will actually get drunk with you."

"What?"

What had Fujiyama just said?

"It's the same person you went to see on Friday, right? I know it's a little old-fashioned, but I hope you two will invite me to the wedding!"

"N-no, that's not what happened!"

Fujiyama had gotten the wrong idea.

"I was drinking alone last night."

"Last night..." Fujiyama deliberately trailed off with a grin. "So then the person you saw on Friday was your girlfriend."

"Sir—"

"Oh, relax. I won't tell anyone. I'm just happy to find out you really do have someone like that in your life. That means I got the right read on you."

Fujiyama nodded in satisfaction as he spoke.

"You're so good at your job and dealing with other

people, I thought it was only natural for a guy like you to have someone special in your life. Having a girlfriend is all well and good, but in my opinion, if you want to have a smooth ride forward in your job, you have to start a family early on."

Junya felt light-headed as a sense of *déjà vu* shot through him.

"You think I have to get married?"

"I don't think it's an urgent issue at your age, but if you want to stay with her, I think it can be useful to get married in order to put both your families at ease."

Fujiyama's answer was a completely generic one. He probably hadn't noticed the particular meaning hidden in Junya's question.

"Are you glad that you got married, sir?" Junya's voice shook a little.

"Well, now. I can't deny that when I was younger I thought it was a bit premature. Don't tell my wife that, though," Fujiyama said waggishly. "But looking back on it now, after everything we've been through, I think my wife has made me who I am today, in my work and just as a human being. I think I changed a lot after marrying her. Of course, that's just my opinion."

As they talked, the elevator stopped at the first floor.

"Sorry for talking your ear off."

"Not at all! I did ask, after all." Junya hastily turned around to bow to Fujiyama.

"I can give you more relationship advice the next time we go drinking. For now, go knock 'em dead."

"I will, sir."

Junya watched the elevator doors close. Hungover though he was, Junya was overcome by a powerful desire to go drinking again.

But instead, through sheer force of will, he paid visits to several of the bank's best customers. Even after receiving an unofficial promise of a new investment, his mood just didn't improve.

He returned to the office just before closing time and killed a few minutes organizing his papers. As he stepped out into the chilly air, he turned up the collar of his jacket.

When he got home, he would take another hot shower, then climb immediately into bed and hope that tomorrow would be a better day.

He wouldn't be able to see Uzuki for a while. Once Uzuki's work was over, he would send Junya a text message, just like always.

I'm waiting at the hotel, it would say.

Junya tried to think about what he could do until then.

He would have to rehash the problem of staying with Uzuki.

Six months earlier, he had been absolutely sure that choosing to accept Uzuki's lifestyle was the right thing to do. Junya wanted to spend his life with him and he would give him anything he was capable of giving.

Since then, he had begun to consider the idea of quitting his job at the bank if it was putting Uzuki in danger. But would that really make Uzuki happy?

Uzuki wanted him to do it. But Junya wondered if his decision would hold up in the long term.

Even after so much had happened, these doubts haunted him.

Even assuming it was the correct choice *then*, was it still the right choice *now*?

His feelings hadn't changed, but the situation was changing. Stopping to take stock didn't mean his feelings were changing.

Junya decided to accept that, as if he were making excuses for himself. Turning his eyes to the stairwell that led into the subway station, he stopped cold.

He had been here a hundred times. He was on a wide sidewalk beside a six-lane road. There was a divider in the middle of the street, and on the other side Junya could see a park.

There was a lot of greenery in this part of the twenty-third district of Tokyo, and many skyscrapers. A thicket of buildings stretched toward the blue sky like reeds, releasing streams of office workers in primly pressed suits who swarmed the station.

But in the throng was a man who stood out immediately.

It wasn't the color of his clothes that was so noticeable. He wore a solid black suit and a tasteful dark brown shirt, which wouldn't attract much attention. But the thing that clearly separated him from those around him was his natural bearing, the dark sunglasses he wore despite the evening light, and his deliberate attempt to blend in. He wasn't noticeably on edge, but the man looked somehow tense.

He obviously didn't belong with these other people.

Everyone passed him at a distance, seeming to pick up on that.

He was smoking. His fingers were long and elegant.

Even from a distance, Junya could tell immediately who it was.

"Uzuki."

Uzuki tossed what was left of his cigarette onto the ground, and distractedly swept back the hair that had fallen onto his forehead in annoyance.

His masculine features weren't completely obscured, despite his glasses. The corner of his lips quirked up ironically and the perfect line of his nose was more than enough to visualize the rest of his hidden face.

Uzuki always waited for Junya at bars in Kabuki-cho or in his hotel room. He had never come to Junya's office before. Junya told himself that it couldn't be Uzuki, but he knew that it was.

Junya stopped and stared at the man as people streamed past him on either side. Even when someone bumped his shoulder and knocked him off balance, he didn't move. Finally, Uzuki noticed him.

He looked over in annoyance and his gaze seized Junya. His beautiful eyebrows twitched momentarily.

Junya couldn't move, so Uzuki walked toward him. Within the bustle of the crowd, all Junya heard was the sound of Uzuki's footsteps and his own heartbeat, pounding in his ears.

Step by deliberate step, Uzuki steadily closed the distance between them.

He stopped in front of Junya, right hand thrust casually into his pants pocket. His left hand reached up to the frame of his sunglasses and lowered them minutely. Uzuki's eyes were exposed, peering at Junya's face over the rim of the glasses.

"Hey."

"What are you doing here?" Junya was too startled at seeing Uzuki to show his happiness. The corner of Uzuki's mouth twitched up at Junya's question.

"Because I missed you, of course," Uzuki replied moodily. "But maybe you don't want to see me."

The whispered words felt like quiet thorns. Behind his easy smile, Uzuki was upset. His eyes weren't pleasant as they rested on Junya.

"Of course I do! I'm just surprised, that's all."

But even as he answered, his face tensed. Hundreds of people were walking past them as they spoke, and Junya was painfully aware of their eyes on him.

"Why did you leave yesterday?"

"What?"

"Don't play dumb," Uzuki shouted, loud enough to draw the attention of the people around them.

"Uzuki, wait. Can we talk somewhere else?"

Junya put his hand on Uzuki's shoulder, but Uzuki shook him off.

"Don't try and change the subject."

"I'm not!"

Junya looked straight into Uzuki's eyes. "I don't know what you're talking about. I heard you had some

business come up last night and you weren't going to make it, so I left."

"Who told you that?" Uzuki shot back.

"What do you mean?"

"It's true that something came up, but it didn't even take two hours to take care of, so I sent someone to the bar to tell you to wait. Didn't you get the message?"

"No." Junya shook his head quickly. "When I got there, the usual bartender wasn't there."

"Then who told you I had business to take care of?"

"Well..."

Junya vividly remembered the man he'd met last night: his voice, and the look on his face.

I'd appreciate it if you kept our talk today just between us.

"It was a man who told me you sent him."

"Just tell me who it was."

Uzuki's voice wasn't loud, but it held such menace that Junya once again was aware of the eyes around them.

Considering Uzuki's position, it wouldn't be good for him to be noticed. Junya desperately wanted them to go somewhere else, but Uzuki didn't seem in the least concerned.

"Don't try and make something up. Man, I try to be nice to you, and you just let it go to your head. You belong to me, right? If you'd just quit your job and come stay with me, things like this wouldn't happen."

"Why are you bringing that up all of a sudden?" Junya's anger flared at Uzuki's selfishness.

"Because you're skipping over stuff you know nothing about."

"I know what I'm talking about. I just can't tell you who it was."

"Why not?"

"Because I promised I wouldn't."

"What? Promised who?" Uzuki's eyebrows shot up.

Junya knew Uzuki didn't believe him and that's why he was annoyed. "How dare you interrogate me? You keep secrets from me, too!" Junya's rising anger and misery made him say things he ordinarily would never have said.

"I do not!" Uzuki retorted immediately.

"You do."

"Okay, fine. Tell me what I'm hiding from you, then."

"What about..." The word "marriage" rose in his throat. But if he mentioned that, he might reveal Inazumi's involvement. Junya choked the words back.

"What about what?"

"You...never tell me why you're so busy."

Junya had been thinking about nothing but the marriage issue since hearing about it. He wasn't simply questioning Uzuki's reasons for being busy: he suspected it might be related to what he feared.

"You want to know about that?"

Junya's complaint brought a cold smile to Uzuki's lips. He grabbed Junya's arm and led him off the main road and into an alley. The alley walled in a tiny one-way street. The traffic was so insignificant it made the hustle

and bustle of the main road seem like a dream.

"Uzuki—"

"You remember six months ago, when my dad's right-hand man was killed?"

Uzuki's eyes scanned the area. Junya's heart began to pound heavily.

"You found the killer?"

"We found him, but we're having a disagreement about what to do with him."

Uzuki's expression grew serious. "I was entrusted with this job. We don't want to set off a pointless gang war if we can avoid it. So I've been dealing with the issue quietly, but there are some in the gang who aren't satisfied with that. Iwatsuki and I have been doing everything we can to smooth that over."

A chill streaked down Junya's back.

"Are you okay?"

Junya felt guilty for his shameful suspicions.

He had heard that the killer had targeted Uzuki as well. Uzuki had already exposed himself to mortal danger. Even if he understood it intellectually, it was another thing altogether to hear about it in reality. His spine went cold.

"Don't worry about me."

Uzuki's eyes flashed a momentary tenderness, as if he understood Junya's concern.

"There's this guy in our gang who was like a son to the guy who was killed. He's a little hot-headed, but he's not a bad guy. I trust him almost as much as I trust Iwatsuki and I think I can talk him out of doing anything stupid. His opinions are the exact opposite of Iwatsuki's.

The two are constantly butting heads. He's an old-fashioned type at heart. But not many guys are willing to commit suicide, and he's definitely not one of them. It's just going to take time to make it clear that we're preserving our honor. But I think we should make some progress soon."

Junya was overcome by a sudden urge to touch Uzuki after all that. "Uzuki—"

But the moment he raised his hand to touch him, Uzuki's cell phone rang from his jacket pocket.

"Yeah?"

Uzuki answered his phone, raising a hand to stop Junya. His face hardened instantly. Junya understood how tense the situation was from Uzuki's curt replies.

"Sorry, but our time's up."

Uzuki flipped his phone shut and slipped it casually back into his pocket. "I already mentioned this, but I won't have any time off for a couple days. If I get some free time, I'll give you a call, but I shouldn't make promises I can't keep."

"Uzuki—"

Before Junya could say anything, Uzuki grabbed his arm and pulled him close. Before Junya realized what was happening, Uzuki's lips had closed over his own. After the briefest of kisses, he turned back to the main street and got into a passing taxi.

"Uzuki—"

By the time Junya had hurried back to the road, Uzuki's taxi had already pulled away.

"Sawa-san?"

As Junya was raising his hand to wave at Uzuki's



departing taxi, a voice from behind him froze him in his tracks.

"Are you all right?"

Junya turned around to see one of the tellers from his bank.

"Y-yes." He couldn't understand what she was asking about so suddenly.

"I thought I saw you talking to a man who looked like a gangster a few minutes ago."

Junya knew it had been a mistake to talk on a public street where anyone could see them.

"It was nothing. I was just asking for directions."

"Oh, really?"

Junya's lie came easily, to the visible relief of the woman. But at the same time, he hated himself for lying about Uzuki, who wasn't even there.

Chapter Three

"Well, now! It's been a while since we've gotten together like this, Sawa my boy!"

The chubby little man's face was bright red, just like it was summer, despite the winter cold. He wiped away the sweat that gathered on his forehead. "I've been worried sick about you since you transferred. Are you getting along with Fujiyama-san? How's he getting along, Fujiyama-san?"

Kashima, his direct superior until a few months ago, was acting like his father.

"He does great work. I never have to say a word," Fujiyama replied, his calm expression never wavering. "I'm sure I'm benefiting from your great influence on him, Kashima-san. He was promoted right after he transferred in and he's still got the best record of anyone in the department."

Fujiyama was a couple years younger than Kashima, but Kashima's position in the company paled next to Fujiyama's. But Fujiyama acted casual, without any sign of resentment toward this arrogant little man who was playing up his advantages.

"He was exceptional the entire time I was there, but I didn't realize he was that good. Were you holding back on me, Sawa?"

"Of course not, sir."

Junya dipped his head politely despite the obvious jest in his old boss' words. Even now that he'd transferred away, he still didn't like the man at all.

Kashima's visit had come unannounced.

He'd arrived around closing time on Friday and begun talking about the progress of a project Junya had managed before. But while he chatted about everything else under the sun, the clock swung past seven o'clock. The employees were getting agitated, so Fujiyama had invited Kashima out to eat.

"It's been such a long time since we've seen each other. How about we go out to eat and catch up?"

That might have been Kashima's goal from the very beginning.

"What luck! There's a new restaurant that just opened in Shinjuku I've been wanting to try."

Fujiyama's composure never faltered, even at this response that made it sound as if Kashima had simply been waiting for this opportunity.

"I'd like that. We've kept you so late already, Sawa—would you like to come along?"

"Yeah! You've gotta come, too, Sawa!"

"It would be my pleasure, then."

The three had then set out for Kabuki-cho.

"Are you sure we're going the right way, Kashima-san?"

Kashima laughed, as if fully aware of the reason for Junya's suspicion. "Even if you didn't look so nervous, I wouldn't take you somewhere like the last bar we went to!"

He clapped Junya on the shoulder heartily.

"What bar was that?" Fujiyama asked, intrigued.

"A bar with some very lovely girls," Kashima blurted, without the slightest hesitation.

"I see," Fujiyama replied with a smile, glancing over at Junya.

"Sawa here told me he'd never been to a bar like that, so I took him along as a learning experience. Isn't that right, my boy?"

"Yes."

That wasn't at all what had really happened, but it wasn't worth the effort to contradict him.

If Kashima hadn't forced Junya to come along, he never would have gone into a bar like that. Which meant that it was also likely that he never would have been reunited with Uzuki.

Basically, it was thanks to Kashima that he was now able to be with Uzuki; so even though it went against Junya's instincts he had to be grateful. So he meekly went along with Kashima's story as Fujiyama fought back his amusement.

"But then again, I haven't gone back to a bar like that ever since then. I learned my lesson."

"Did something happen?"

"A thug in the bar threatened me and it was about to get bad. Right, Sawa?"

"Er, yes."

Of course he couldn't mention that the original problem had been Kashima's own drunkenness.

"But Sawa, brave boy that he is, threw himself into the line of fire to save me."

"Wow!" Fujiyama looked genuinely impressed.

Junya quickly waved his hands to deny it. "It was nothing, really. One of the owners stepped in to help right after that." There had been no reasoning with that man. When Junya remembered that night, he truly wondered what might have happened to him and Kashima if Uzuki hadn't intervened.

"So, what's the restaurant you're introducing us to today?"

"It's a Japanese steakhouse that just opened."

"A steakhouse?" Junya repeated absently.

"They did so well in Hachioji, they opened a second branch in Shinjuku. Apparently they recreated a farmhouse from up north on one of the upper floors of a building. It's got a great atmosphere. Apparently it's not to be missed."

Kashima's description echoed the information Uzuki had given him before.

"It's not the Sankaitei, is it?"

"That's right! You've heard of it?"

"Just the name."

It was the restaurant Uzuki had promised to take him to, but Junya didn't know it was that famous.

He hadn't been able to see Uzuki for the last two weeks. He hadn't heard the Koryu Alliance mentioned in the news lately, but he couldn't be sure that they were in the clear yet, so Junya couldn't relax. He had spent days like that.

"I heard they don't take reservations on the weekends. It could be full today, too."

"Why don't we call the restaurant to be sure?"

"I don't have the phone number on me."

"We can call information."

"Well, why not just go and find out? It'd be fun just to see the outside of it, if it really is a farmhouse."

Following Fujiyama's suggestion, they made their way to the building that Kashima indicated had the restaurant inside. Inside, a stairwell ran up to the third floor. In the center there was an elevator.

"There's the restaurant's number; I'll call and see if we can get in or not."

Junya took out his cell phone and began dialing, but Fujiyama stopped him.

"Sir?"

"Didn't we already say that it doesn't matter if we get in or not? It'll be fun just to see the place."

"That's the spirit! And even if they say no over the phone, if we show up there, they might squeeze us in. And here's the elevator. Let's go."

When Kashima had explained that the restaurant was inside a multi-story building, Junya had expected it to be on the western side of Shinjuku, one of the ward's busier areas.

But the restaurant was on the eastern side, close to Kabuki-cho. The building was tall compared to those around it, but it was less than half the size that Junya had expected.

At the top of the building, on the fifteenth floor, there were several other restaurants beside the celebrated Sankaitei. It had a unique atmosphere.

"Ah, this is great!"

One look was all it took to know that this was the place.

It was strange to see a farmhouse reconstructed inside the building, but it blended into its surroundings surprisingly well to create a quiet, laid-back atmosphere.

"Welcome, gentlemen!"

One of the waitresses, dressed in a western-style uniform, greeted them with a smile.

Junya pulled off the scarf wrapped around his throat as Fujiyama stepped forward.

"We don't have a reservation. Is that all right?"

"How many in your party?"

"Three."

"We can have a table ready in five minutes. Please have a seat while you wait."

Fujiyama turned back to Junya and Kashima with a smile.

"Looks like they can fit us in."

"Way to charm 'em," Kashima said shamelessly.

"Thanks," Fujiyama answered.

They waited exactly five minutes before being led to their table.

The restaurant was decorated with massive wooden pillars and beams that made it look both classy and yet relaxed. The old and new were juxtaposed with good taste, the beautifully polished classic grills offset by the chefs dressed in white.

The dinner menu centered on a main course of meat, with grilled vegetables and seafood mixed in. It was rounded out with garlic rice.

"This is definitely a great restaurant," Fujiyama said as he took his seat.

Kashima nodded with satisfaction.

All the tables encircled grills, and there were also private rooms available. All over the restaurant they heard the savory sounds of grilling accompanied by an aroma that fired their appetites.

Everything they tasted was delicious. They steadily devoured the appetizers on the table, so even waiting for the entrees was enjoyable.

"This is great."

"I thought you might say that." Kashima looked so content, they might as well have been praising him personally.

When their meals arrived, the portions weren't large, but the presentation and flavor were exquisite. It was accompanied by sake.

The superbly grilled Shanghai beef in a sirloin cut was mouth-wateringly good. It tasted amazing with the garlic fries they watched being cooked right in front of them, and also with the restaurant's wasabi-flavored soy sauce. The meat was so good that it went well with anything. As Junya savored the meat's flavor, he understood why Uzuki had wanted to invite him here.

"So, whatever happened with that, Sawa?" Kashima asked once he'd gotten some alcohol into himself, as if he'd only just thought of it.

"With what?"

"When I was introducing you to girls before, you said you already had someone special."

Kashima's face was flushed from the alcohol and he was grinning lewdly.

"I was right!" Fujiyama was a little drunk as well,

so he responded to Kashima with a bit more enthusiasm than usual.

“Right about what?”

Junya was the only one not in the loop. He tried to catch up.

“Well, it’s not like it happens every week, but you never say yes when I invite you out for drinks. I just figured that you had someone else to spend your time with. And then you came and asked me about marriage the other day.”

“Marriage!” Kashima shouted. “What’s this now? You’re that far along already?”

“No, I’m not. Please don’t exaggerate, sir.”

The conversation had taken an unexpected turn.

“But the other day you asked me whether or not you should get married! You looked so serious.”

“I wasn’t talking about myself! I was just wondering, in general...”

“But of course you have to get married.”

Kashima’s declaration somehow lacked credibility. Junya had heard rumors that his wife had discovered one or another of his affairs, and had kicked him out. When Junya worked for him, he’d practically lived at the girly bars.

What gave him the right to insist that Junya get married?

“It gives you social credibility.”

“That’s rather old-fashioned, don’t you think?”

Junya wasn’t surprised to see Fujiyama smile at this.

“Is it? All I know is that a man my age who wasn’t

married yet got a lot of criticism. People thought there was something wrong with him.”

“One of my single colleagues has risen to become a board member in the main office. I don’t think there’s any relationship between success and whether or not you’re married.”

“Well, perhaps not, but—”

Kashima’s argument had already broken down, so now Fujiyama expounded on the idea both professionally and personally.

Alcohol always made Kashima insufferable to Junya, but he simply slumped his shoulders at Fujiyama’s argument and looked contrite.

At some point, the focus of the conversation shifted away from Junya. He marveled at his luck and decided not to disturb the trend.

“Excuse me. I’m going to stretch my legs.”

The other two were so caught up in their talk that they didn’t hear him.

Junya walked back to the restaurant’s entrance and gazed out at the view of the skyscrapers at the western edge of the district. Being in this laid-back restaurant made it easy to forget they were near Kabuki-cho.

Junya sat down in a chair near the window. He had drunk a little too much himself, after the other two men had worked him up. Just inhaling the smoke of other customers’ cigarettes made him feel slightly dizzy.

He fought it back and looked out at Tokyo’s nightscape, remembering Uzuki’s face.

If he’d come to this restaurant with Uzuki, the food probably would have tasted even better.

He decided to apologize the next time he heard from Uzuki. The day they were to meet, Inazumi had told him that Uzuki wouldn't be coming. But since that wasn't actually true, Junya had to acknowledge that he'd blown off Uzuki's invitation.

He thought back on what had happened. It did seem to be true, at least, that Inazumi was close to Uzuki. But then why had he lied to Junya? Why did he bring up the subject of Uzuki's marriage?

Once he'd heard what Inazumi had to say, Junya had begun to think even more rationally about the future. He couldn't pretend forever that the stories about gang wars had nothing to do with him.

What should he do? It was all Junya could think about. But he still didn't have an answer.

"Good evening, sirs."

A curtain obscured the entrance, but Junya heard the same waitress' high-pitched voice greeting new customers.

"Come in, Mr. President. Your private room is still being prepared. It'll only be a few more minutes. Please, have a seat."

As she spoke, thin white fingers peeked through the curtain. As they lifted the fabric to one side, Junya spotted a group of men who were clearly not office workers. His eyes widened in shock as he caught sight of a man wearing a rich scarlet shirt and black necktie with his navy pinstriped suit.

"Uzuki—" Junya murmured voicelessly.

The tall, slender body was stunningly well-proportioned.

The owner of the fearless, too-perfect face charged the atmosphere.

He walked forward to the smoking area, listening to the well-built man in his fifties behind him. Finally, he noticed Junya.

"Oh."

Their eyes locked.

The column of ash on Junya's cigarette grew long in the time that he stood frozen, staring.

The air stood still. Time stood still.

He swallowed quietly, but his heart pounded noisily. Surprise, happiness, and hesitation mingled within Junya. He didn't know what to do.

It was at times like this that he became truly aware of just how much he loved Uzuki.

Finally Uzuki's thick, perfect eyebrows twitched ever so slightly. His eyes were wide too, but he quickly looked away.

He turned his face to the window like Junya, pretending that nothing had happened, and flicked the ash off his cigarette. Then, as Uzuki took another drag, Junya turned to face him, all his nerves on fire.

"Sir, wouldn't you prefer to sit?"

It was Iwatsuki's voice. The man wearing silver-rimmed glasses, who at first glance looked like a bureaucrat or bank employee, entered Junya's field of vision.

"They're just going to take us to the room in a minute anyway. I don't mind standing for a little while. But, Uzuki—"

Uzuki turned toward the hoarse, yet animated

voice. "Yeah?" he answered, both hands shoved into the pockets of his pants.

The man Iwatsuki had been speaking to, the leader of the Kanto Regional Koryu Alliance who had called Uzuki by his first name—it was Uzuki's father.

This was the first time Junya had ever seen him, but he knew without a shadow of a doubt that it was him.

Just standing there, he had a commanding aura about him. That must be what people meant when they said someone had "presence." Even from a distance, the glinting strength of his eyes and the authority of his voice were remarkable.

Junya didn't know how many people were in Uzuki's gang. But this man had the rarest dignity and charisma, not easily won, of a man who stood at the head of a group of dangerous men. Uzuki, too, was suffused with the power to fascinate people, but his father showed a much more authoritative, irresistible, and brutal power.

Even someone like Junya, who knew nothing about the criminal underworld, could feel the man's power.

But Junya's gaze was diverted to the man who stood behind Uzuki. He had short reddish-brown hair and slightly tinted sunglasses. He wore an expensive-looking gray suit, but had a ferocious bearing.

It was Inazumi. He really was one of Uzuki's confidantes.

"Ah, there you are, Sawa."

Junya wasn't the only one who was surprised

to hear his name spoken aloud. Uzuki and Iwatsuki, standing beside Uzuki's father, both turned looks of surprise in his direction.

Fujiyama had only come looking for Junya, but he seemed to pick up on the tense atmosphere almost instantly. He frowned.

"I was just getting some fresh air. Where's Kashima-san?" Junya turned toward Fujiyama, pretending that nothing was amiss.

"Let's say he's on the verge of going too far. I thought it was a good time to get the check. Is that all right?"

"Of course. I'm sorry I left you to deal with him alone."

"Kobayakawa-san?"

The host spoke over Junya. "I'm very sorry to have kept you waiting. I'll lead you to your table now. Please come with me."

Junya glanced over surreptitiously and—for the briefest moment—his eyes met Uzuki's. But Uzuki showed not the slightest reaction and allowed himself to be led away, talking with his group.

Junya knew it was only to be expected. They couldn't speak to each other, or even exchange 'hellos' in a place like this. He hadn't made the slightest sign of acknowledgment when he'd noticed Uzuki, either.

"—to you?"

"What?"

Junya looked up at this question that seemed to require some answer from him.

"I said, did they say something to you?"

Fujiyama's eyes followed Uzuki and the others as they moved away.

"Why do you ask?"

Had he seen something in that brief moment?

"You just looked disturbed," Fujiyama replied tersely. "Guys like that will chew you out just for looking at them. They didn't give you a hard time, did they?"

"No, everything's fine."

Junya was surprised by the loathing on Fujiyama's face. "Sir?"

"I hate people like them. All they do is bring trouble to the people around them, but they go through life with a swagger, like they're better than everybody else. They're trash."

Junya couldn't react to this unexpected diatribe.

At least he knew what sort of a person Uzuki was. But he never knew what Uzuki had done to join the organization, nor the rules that he lived by. Looking at the situation objectively, it was true that the vast majority of people held Fujiyama's opinion.

That made Junya feel extremely uncomfortable.

Once they'd paid their bill, they escorted Kashima, practically dead on his feet from alcohol, out of the building and loaded him into a taxi. Junya left the rest to Fujiyama, who said that he and Kashima lived in the same direction.

"Can we take you part of your way home?"

Junya turned down Fujiyama's invitation. "It's out of your way. I'll just take a train. Anyway, I think I

forgot something in the restaurant, so I need to go get it first."

"What did you forget?"

"My scarf."

It had taken all of Junya's attention to get Kashima out of the restaurant, so it had slipped his mind.

"You look pretty steady still—are you sure you're not drunk, too?"

"I guess I must be," Junya tried to agree, but he had completely sobered up. Even if he hadn't forgotten his scarf, he still wouldn't want to leave with Fujiyama.

Alone in the rising elevator, Junya leaned back against the wall.

Uzuki's face flitted through his mind.

Junya had been sure he understood, at least intellectually, that Uzuki was part of a gang and the great responsibilities that rested on Uzuki's shoulders.

He knew the problems they would face, being together as two men.

There was a clear divide between the two of them, even when they were together. Even if they tried to cross it, they never could. That was why Uzuki hadn't acknowledged him, and why he hadn't acknowledged Uzuki.

That's how it was.

As long as the situation remained this way, this hypocrisy would continue.

No matter how much Junya loved Uzuki and wanted to be by his side, once they stepped out into the real world a thick, sturdy wall called *reality* would separate them.

The elevator stopped. Junya took a step forward as the doors opened, but froze a moment later.

"Uh—"

Uzuki was looking at him, one hand in his pocket, the other holding a cigarette as he exhaled. His eyes flashed like a bird of prey paralyzing a small animal and in the next moment Junya found himself pressed against the back wall of the elevator.

"U—"

Uzuki seized him by the lapels and Junya looked up. As his lips parted to speak Uzuki's name, lips that tasted of tobacco clamped down over his own.

"Boss!"

Inazumi reacted to this sudden development as he came out of the restaurant. He threw his hand out to stop the door from closing as he shouted, but he was too late.

"Mmph!"

Grabbing Uzuki's jacket, Junya tried desperately to push him away. But the kiss was violent and clinging—he could not escape it.

Uzuki's tongue danced freely around Junya's mouth, caressing him almost painfully. His body was used to this and quickly accepted Uzuki's advances, but Junya strained to fight back.

"What are you doing?!"

He put his hands on Uzuki's shoulders and tore his lips away.

He wiped his wet mouth with the back of his hand and ran out the elevator doors as soon as they opened at the ground floor.

The lobby was deserted and the heels of his shoes clapped loudly on the ground.

"Who was that man with you?"

Uzuki was a little slower getting off the elevator, but he came after Junya with unhurried steps.

Moonlight streamed in through a window high up in the wall, over the three-story-high stairwell at the building's entrance. The rugged features of Uzuki's face stood out sharply in the light.

Even though Junya was a man, he knew Uzuki looked great. His almond-shaped eyes, the proud bridge of his nose: he was completely extraordinary. Power and masculine charm projected from every inch of his face.

The front of Uzuki's expensive suit was open, the knot of his tie loose. Even disheveled, he was still well-dressed.

"It was my boss from work."

"Really?"

Uzuki reached out to grab Junya's necktie. He jerked Junya toward him, bringing their faces close together.

The smoke of Uzuki's cigarette tickled Junya's nostrils. How many times had he fallen before this man, shrouded in this scent? Just the thought made him lust for Uzuki's body. It was like a drug.

"If I was lying, wouldn't I say I was with someone else?"

"Boss!"

Before Uzuki could answer Junya, someone called out behind them. Junya recognized the husky voice.

"What?"

"The chief was worried after you disappeared so suddenly. You should come back up right away."

He spoke politely, but it didn't come out sounding that way—no doubt because of his tone. Uzuki's expression didn't change, but he made a sound of annoyance.

"He's such a pain."

Uzuki let go of Junya's tie and put his hand back into his pocket.

"Inazumi."

"Yes, boss?"

"You mind giving this guy money for a taxi?"

He casually pulled a fat black calfskin wallet from his pocket and tossed it to Inazumi.

"Sure thing."

Uzuki went back to the elevator without another word to Junya, leaving him alone with the other man.

An awkward tension sprung up between them.

"What a coincidence, running into each other here."

Inazumi turned slowly to face Junya, sweeping his hair from his face in apparent annoyance. His attitude was completely different from the other day at Number Five. Junya gulped. This was no doubt what he was really like.

"Were you planning to meet up with the boss here?"

"No!" Junya denied it immediately. "I came here with two of my superiors from work."

"Okay, let's assume that's true. But that's not why you came back, is it?"

"I just came back because I forgot my scarf."

"That's some pretty good timing, to run into the boss at the elevator like that."

"I guess."

Junya sensed a trap in Inazumi's words. They were prickly.

"Will ten thousand be enough for a taxi?"

Inazumi took a ten thousand yen bill out of Uzuki's wallet and shoved it into Junya's face.

"That's okay." Junya turned his face away.

"What a troublemaker. If you don't take it, the boss is gonna wonder why."

Inazumi took out more bills. He fanned ten or twenty of them open in front of Junya's averted eyes.

"Did you discuss what we talked about with the boss yet?"

"No."

Even if Junya had wanted to, there hadn't been any time to do it. This man was part of the reason for that.

"Why did you lie to me?"

Inazumi raised his eyebrows. "Lie to you?"

"Uzuki was running late that day, but he never said he wasn't coming."

"Oh, really?"

"He told the bartender. But when I was there, that bartender was gone on an errand. And then you came in right after I got there."

At the time, it hadn't seemed suspicious at all. But now that Junya thought back over it, it was a little too perfect.

"What are you trying to say?"

"I'm the one asking the questions."

"I thought I told you the last time we spoke."

Inazumi let out an exaggeratedly deep sigh and removed his sunglasses, slipping them into the breast pocket of his jacket. The diagonal scar was visible at the corner of his right eye. "There's talk about the boss getting married."

"You told me."

"To be honest, if it doesn't go well, it'll cause a lot of problems both for him and for our gang. I told you all that already. The boss is doing everything he can to deal with the problem of the guy who killed our chief's right-hand man."

"I know. But what does that have to do with the engagement?"

"Apparently you *don't* know." Inazumi took a step closer. "If he marries this woman, he'll settle down. So that's why I believe the boss needs to break it off with the person he's fooling around with right now."

"Wait, you mean—?"

A cold shiver ran down Junya's spine as Inazumi glared at him. This man knew about his relationship with Uzuki. That's what he was talking about.

"The boss is critical to our gang. Even though we've got a mountain of problems, as soon as he gets serious, it'll all go away just like that. That's how amazing he is."

He took another step forward to close the distance.

"Inazumi-san—"

"I need to deal with anyone who could hurt the boss. I'm willing to get my hands dirty for that. That's my job."

Something cold pressed into Junya's back: he'd been backed up against the wall.

"Does Uzuki know what you're doing?"

"As long as you didn't break your promise and let something slip, he doesn't know a thing."

Inazumi's lips floated up out of the darkness, illuminated by the moonlight. Junya saw the white of his teeth and immediately felt a dull pain bloom in his stomach. He doubled over Inazumi's fist. "Oof!"

"If you care about the boss, you should understand that it's better for you to stay away from him."

Junya fell over Inazumi's thick arm. It was nothing like Uzuki's arms. Even the smell of tobacco was different.

"Uzuki—"

At the same moment that he forced his voice past the pain, Junya's vision grew dark and he slipped into unconsciousness.

What about my scarf? he thought, before blacking out.

Chapter Four

Junya heard chimes announcing the hour: nine in the evening. He was sitting on a bench at the train station, in this place two hours by train from Tokyo. The station was nearly deserted, illuminated only by old-fashioned lanterns. Junya watched bugs flutter around the lights, his entire body covered in sweat.

It wasn't just from the heat, though. He was nervous, imagining what was likely to happen next.

Uzuki had suggested they run away together for a few days. He was sure that that would make everyone give up.

But that wasn't what Uzuki's guardian Iwatsuki had said.

He said that if they ran away together, their lives would be over.

There was no way a couple of high school students like them could escape the vigilance and persistence of a gang. Not only would they be caught immediately, but Uzuki's position in the gang would be in jeopardy. And his treasonous rejection of his place as heir would endanger the gang's very foundation.

A short time ago, Junya had been nothing more than an ordinary high school student. He'd planned to attend a local college, get a job at a local company, marry someone his parents or his boss recommended,

have kids, and just have a regular life.

But then he'd met Uzuki.

He knew it would mean nothing but trouble, but he couldn't stay away.

Despite the fact that they were both boys, he couldn't stop himself. Junya loved Uzuki with everything that he was. And Uzuki loved him even more than that.

They weren't doing anything wrong. All they did was love each other, and now they were being forced to break up.

Junya heard footsteps on the staircase and looked up.

That was the sound that spelled the end of their time together.

When a train arrived, they would run up and jump aboard before the doors closed. That was their plan.

The boy was wearing a black hat pulled low over his eyes, which were hidden behind sunglasses despite the darkness of the night. He was dressed in jeans and a simple shirt and carried only a duffel bag, no doubt to evade suspicion.

"Come on, Junya. I've got the tickets," Uzuki said, but Junya's legs wouldn't move. "Junya!"

Uzuki threw a hand out to him, but was seized from behind. His eyes opened wide in surprise as he turned to look over his shoulder, his expression morphing into anger. "Iwatsuki!"

Even if they had been close enough that their hands could've reached each other, there was a huge gulf between Junya and Uzuki. But if they locked hands, they could leap across it.

Junya would do anything it took to be with Uzuki. He felt like there was nothing he couldn't do. But the moment he looked around him and saw the reality, he knew he couldn't do anything.

"Junya!"

Uzuki's voice echoed in Junya's ears. It reverberated, again and again, threatening to rip Junya's heart open.

In the end, Uzuki had made this decision for Junya's sake.

But Junya had decided to leave for Uzuki's sake.

He didn't want to experience a separation like that again. That thought kept Junya from surrendering to another separation now, eight years later, after they'd been reunited.

No matter what happened, he would never leave Uzuki. With this vow, Junya woke with a start.

"Finally awake?"

Junya gasped at the face he saw as he awoke.

Office desks were arranged in the center of the dusty, concrete-walled room. At one of these sat a man with short reddish-brown hair and a scar at the corner of his right eye. Both his legs were propped up on the desk. A distinctively sweet scent floated from the cigarette in his fingers.

The man's name floated through Junya's mind.

Hayato Inazumi. He was wearing the same suit he'd worn the night before at the steakhouse. Only now, his necktie hung loose and half the buttons of his shirt

were unbuttoned, making him look incredibly sleazy.

Why was he with this man?

When this thought crossed Junya's mind, the memory of the moments before he passed out came back to him.

He'd eaten; then after seeing Fujiyama and Kashima off in a taxi, he remembered he'd left his scarf at the restaurant and went back. He'd run into Uzuki there, and then Inazumi.

Then he'd felt a dull shock in his stomach and passed out.

"What did you—"

Junya tried to move, but his arms felt heavy. He turned his head from side to side to see why and stared in shock.

His jacket had been removed and handcuffs were secured around his wrists, over his shirt. And it wasn't just his arms: cuffs were secured around his ankles, too. The chains were extended and dropped over the edge of the sofa he was lying on.

Every time he shifted, it made a metallic clanking noise.

"What is this?"

Junya glared up at Inazumi, his mind in chaos. Inazumi swung his feet to the floor and raised his eyebrows.

"Exactly what it looks like." He took the cigarette from his mouth and ground it out in an ashtray, standing up in annoyance. He reached over on the desk. When Junya registered what it was he'd picked up, something cold ran down his spine.



It was a lustrous black weapon.

Junya quickly recognized it as a handgun, even though he had only seen fake ones in movies and TV shows before.

Inazumi hefted the handgun in his right hand, walking slowly over to stand before Junya as he did so. This was different from when they'd spoken at Number Five, or even from the night before. A prickly atmosphere seized Junya, so thick he could have cut it with a knife.

"I thought you might be nice enough to stay here for a while."

Inazumi stood in front of Junya. The gun in his hand reflected a dull light.

"Why?" Junya's mouth was dry. "What did I do to deserve this?"

"If you put your head to it and think long and hard, I think you'll figure it out."

Suddenly Inazumi kicked at a metal trashcan with an infuriated look, sending it flying. The dull clatter resonated from the naked concrete ceiling.

Junya quickly hunched his shoulders, cowering.

"I warned you! And you ignored me. This can't be a surprise for you." Inazumi adjusted his grip on the gun and cocked it. He turned its muzzle straight at Junya.

"Warned me about what?" Junya's voice trembled. He fought back his terror with all he had and glared up at the man in front of him.

"You don't know?"

"No, I don't. That's why I'm asking."

Being with a man like Uzuki meant that Junya

was ready for a certain amount of trouble. But he wasn't generous enough to throw his life away without knowing exactly why.

"The first time I ever met you was at the bar and all you talked about was Uzuki's engagement. So why do I deserve this?"

"Because you're in the way."

"That's not a good reason."

"You don't need to know my reasons."

The iron bulk of the gun pressed against Junya's forehead. Inazumi's finger was on the trigger.

"Are you going to kill me?"

"Do you want me to?"

Junya swallowed.

When he saw this, Inazumi laughed in satisfaction. "All you need to do is stay here and be quiet for a little while. Then I won't do anything to you."

"Nothing besides chaining me up?"

Junya's patience snapped. "You won't do anything to me, except shove a gun in my face. Thank you so much!"

"You don't seem to understand your position very well," Inazumi spat out. His expression never changed as he lifted the hand with the gun and struck Junya across the face.

"Ah!"

Junya fell back against the sofa with a thud. The taste of blood and metal spread through his mouth. His head felt like it was going to split in half.

"For now, I choose whether you live or die."

Inazumi lifted one foot onto the sofa, holding

the gun against Junya's temple. With his free hand, he twisted one of Junya's arms behind his back and drew closer. He smelled of cigarette smoke.

"If my finger so much as twitches, your head's gonna explode. Have you ever seen someone who got shot in the head?"

An uncomfortable layer of sweat covered Junya's body. His heartbeat was frenzied and his breathing erratic. Death was floating in front of him. He felt a terror more absolute than any he had felt before.

"It explodes like a smashed tomato. Splat! In one second."

Junya felt his stomach churning at the sound effect and blood-red imagery Inazumi presented. He bit down desperately on his lip.

"If I blow up your pretty face, you'd just be another piece of meat," Inazumi whispered, so close he could almost bite Junya's earlobe.

The shuddering sensation that crawled up his back was a little like what happened when he had sex with Uzuki.

The feeling of near-orgasm wedded with the fear of death. He'd heard that men got erections when they died. Junya didn't want to experience the erotic thrill of death, but maybe that's what this was.

"I'm just going to warn you: killing people doesn't bother me. It's all the same after you kill the first time."

"Have you...killed someone?"

"I'm about to."

There was no hesitation whatsoever in Inazumi's words.

"Who are you going to kill?"

If he made one wrong move, it would all be over.

Junya couldn't let himself die here without understanding how he'd come to be in this position.

He tried not to get on Inazumi's nerves, tried to fight back his fear, and fought to speak as calmly and evenly as he could. "Are you planning to kill someone besides me?"

"Didn't you hear what I told you?"

"I heard. I just wanted to make sure."

Junya's heart thudded audibly. He was sure Inazumi could feel the beats.

"Does Uzuki know you're going to kill someone?"

At the mention of Uzuki's name, Inazumi's entire body shuddered. His lips, which had curled in a thin smile until then, pressed closed and deep wrinkles crisscrossed his forehead.

"Do you know what will happen if you kill someone without telling Uzuki?"

"Shut up! What do you know about it?"

There was a dull crack and an intense pain bloomed in Junya's head. He didn't know what had happened.

His body sank into the sofa. He put a hand to the pain and felt something warm on his fingers. When he saw the red staining his fingertips, he knew his temple had been gashed.

"I think the boss will realize I'm right soon enough."

Junya heard the clicking shift of metal gears as Inazumi turned the gun's barrel on him once again.

"I bet even you know about the chief's right-hand man."

"Uh—"

He was like a son to the guy who was killed. His favorite.

As Uzuki's words came back to Junya, several different threads suddenly unified to tell one story. "But if you kill his murderer, then it doesn't matter what Uzuki does anymore." Uzuki was doing everything he could to avoid gang warfare, even while his own life was in danger.

"The boss is wrong." Inazumi's voice was quiet. "If we let the guy live, no one will take our gang seriously. Even when one of our leaders is killed, the Koryu Alliance doesn't retaliate. If that got out, they won't just stop at killing the leaders. The boss and his father's lives would both be in danger. The boss just doesn't get that."

The gun was cold as it pressed into Junya's forehead.

If Inazumi tensed his finger just slightly, the gun would fire and Junya's head would be blown off.

He had never come this close to death before. But he couldn't quite connect to the terror that he might actually die here. Some part of him was looking at all of this objectively.

"He should understand the danger better than anyone. When he had his inheritance ceremony, he started to see what was going on. And he crushed all of the dangerous elements. He was merciless. He still is more than anyone. He's the one in the most dangerous

position, after the chief. I thought he was the only one who understood how I felt. But now—!"

Inazumi ground his teeth, glaring at Junya with sharp eyes. Junya felt an intense antagonism in his gaze.

"You're the reason Uzuki-sama changed!"

The words sent a chill down Junya's spine.

"Me?" Junya repeated quietly.

"He changed about six months ago."

Junya's heart pounded. He had been reunited with Uzuki just around then.

"That bastard Iwatsuki says he's just showing the self-awareness and composure of being on top. But he's not. It's not 'cause he's on top, it's 'cause he's a coward. Only the strong survive in this life. It's eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth. Kill or be killed. I thought he understood that, but—now he says revenge only leads to more revenge. I never thought he'd say something like that. I can't let the guy who killed the old man keep living without punishment. I can't do it!"

His voice was strained with emotion, squeezing Junya's heart tight. The gun in his hands shook visibly.

"And then, even though he won't take revenge for us, when we ask him to get married for us he won't listen! He just ignores what his dad wants. What does the gang even mean to him anymore?"

He turned back to stare straight into Junya's face.

"And it's all your fault."

Junya cowered, like a mouse before a snake. Inazumi's cold stare froze Junya's soul.

"Why?"

"You're not gonna get out of this by playing dumb."

He grabbed Junya's necktie with his free hand.

"Did you spill anything to the boss?"

"No, I-I didn't say anything..."

Junya choked as the tie pinched his throat.

"Just so you know, I'm not the only one who thinks Uzuki-sama's started acting weird. The other guys think he's lost his edge, too. They're getting upset. They don't understand what happened. But I do."

Inazumi brought his face close to Junya's. The sweet scent of tobacco tickled his nostrils.

"You seduced him."

"No!"

"Yes, you did!"

Inazumi hit Junya with the gun again, knocking him over.

"Nghh!" He must have hit his teeth that time—the taste of metal spread through Junya's mouth.

"I thought the old man—the chief's right-hand man was important to Uzuki-sama. This guy killed someone who was like a parent to him—and if he lets him get away with that, he's not going to last long in this world. And it's not gonna stop with the boss. The entire Koryu Alliance is going to disappear."

Inazumi's voice shook.

Junya saw that he was battling back the fury rising within him, struggling to contain the emotions that threatened to explode at any moment.

He wondered if Inazumi would turn the gun on himself, even as it pressed against his own forehead.

He stared at Inazumi's face. The blood that dripped into a corner of his eye clouded his vision. But he couldn't look away for even a moment.

He wanted to see with his own eyes and hear with his own ears what Inazumi was going to do and say.

"But before that happens, I'm going to force him to see the truth. I think if I kill the guy myself and take you permanently out of the boss' life, that ought to wake him up."

Junya could almost hear Inazumi's teeth grinding.

"I'll give you some time to think it over."

He lowered the gun from Junya's forehead. "I'll come back tomorrow at midnight. Meanwhile, you think about what you want to do."

He slipped the gun into a pocket inside his jacket.

"What do you want from me?"

"If you never show your face to Uzuki-sama again for the rest of your life, I'll let you live."

"No!"

"It's non-negotiable. You have two choices: either you leave the boss, or I kill you. You only get to decide which one you prefer."

He took the gun back out and pointed it at Junya. "Like I said before: once you kill one person, it gets easier and easier. I don't care if you live or die. Try to get that through your skull."

Inazumi kicked the sofa Junya was sitting on, then put his gun away again and walked to the door. He slammed the heavy metal door shut after him, and his footsteps grew distant on the stairs.

As he listened to the sounds, Junya gazed once

again at his hands and feet. Even the slightest movement jangled the chains.

"Now what?"

Just moving his lips made the cut he'd sustained when Inazumi hit him ache. The memory of the cold metal of the gun pressed into his forehead reawakened in his skin and his entire body started to sweat uncomfortably.

Uzuki was the son of a gang boss. He knew how to survive in that world. But this was the first time Junya had ever seen a gun, and the first time one had ever been aimed at him.

He had believed things like that existed only in TV shows and movies, in an unreal world entirely separate from him.

But Uzuki had been staring reality in the face. He knew exactly what there was to fear and exactly what he needed to protect Junya from.

"Uzuki's not the one being naïve—I am."

Junya had abandoned himself to the joy of being with Uzuki and tried not to see anything else. The pain in his face and the weight of the chains on his hands and feet made that clear.

He sat up on the sofa to take stock and examine his surroundings.

He could see almost the entire room just with a casual look around. The door was made of metal. Just to the right was a simple water heater. In the center of the roughly square room were four office desks, carelessly arranged. Junya's sofa was flush against a wall.

The chains binding his wrists and ankles stretched

down from the ceiling to fasten around the legs of the sofa. There was a bit of slack, so he could still go to the bathroom.

He stood up to give it a try. The simple bathroom looked like it hadn't been used in many years and a fine layer of dust covered everything. Still, the water worked and there was even hot water. Junya stuck his cuffed hands under the stream of water and splashed his face. He looked at himself in the mirror above the sink and gave a rueful smile.

The place where Inazumi had struck him was turning into a shocking bruise that looked much worse than he'd expected.

There were cuts around his wrists, as well. The chains that bound him were heavy and could not be cut through easily. The weight pulling on his arms only solidified the crushing truth of his situation.

"I have until tomorrow night."

Junya walked over and peered out of a small window to try and get a look.

The sky was dark and he could see lurid neon lights. He was sure he was near Shinjuku.

He'd left the restaurant at ten. He suspected that not much time had passed since then. So he had maybe a little less than twenty-four hours to decide what he was going to do.

His jacket hung on a dusty chair. He took out a cigarette, lit it, and took a long drag.

Inazumi had left him his cell phone, too. Junya had Uzuki's number on speed dial: he could talk to him right now. But he didn't know what Uzuki was doing

and if he wasn't careful, he might put his life at risk.

Junya called his own apartment, but there were no messages on his machine. It was just after Friday midnight, or early Saturday a.m.—so there would be no work for the next two days. Junya wasn't sure if that was a blessing or not.

The countdown had definitely begun.

Inazumi was moving into action to kill the murderer of the man who'd been like a father to him. Uzuki probably didn't know that. And he certainly didn't know that Inazumi was holding Junya hostage.

Holding the cigarette between his lips, Junya sat on the sofa. He gazed up at the flickering fluorescent light. All he could think about was Uzuki's face.

"What are you doing right now, Uzuki?"

Junya had dreamt about high school while he was unconscious.

Adults had taught him then that no matter how much he loved Uzuki, his love would never be enough. Pulled under by a swelling tide insensible to his resistance, Junya had been left with no choice but to pull away.

Uzuki had risked his life to suggest they run away together, and what Junya had done was nothing short of betrayal. But until he'd talked to Iwatsuki, Junya hadn't realized just how serious Uzuki was.

And once he knew, Junya could no longer run away with him.

Uzuki had been ready for anything. He had been ready for the consequences of running away with Junya, and he knew what those were likely to be.

He'd only been a high school student, but he had been ready for everything and had sworn to protect Junya. But Uzuki had understood the reason for Junya's betrayal and chose to return to his family in the end.

Junya had always been naïve. Only now did he finally, painfully, understand Uzuki's feelings. And now that Uzuki had taken him back, the thought of leaving him again was unthinkable.

Junya wouldn't just stand by and let himself be killed.

It was important to remember that Inazumi was someone that Uzuki trusted. Uzuki would probably be more bitterly upset than anyone if Inazumi killed the man who'd murdered his father's right-hand man.

Junya had never asked how Uzuki really felt. But if he knew Uzuki, he hadn't gone soft. He was sure he just didn't want anyone else to be killed senselessly. If Inazumi took his revenge, then people close to the man he killed would then come to kill Inazumi. The eternal cycle of revenge had to be stopped somewhere.

Junya didn't know what the relationship was between Uzuki and his father's murdered right-hand man. But if Uzuki was the man Junya knew him to be, he definitely cared about the man. He was definitely grieving for his death.

And now Uzuki was struggling to find a way to keep any more people from dying.

What could he do for Uzuki, for Inazumi, and for himself?

Junya had often believed that he was a burden to Uzuki. He had none of Uzuki's strength. If something

happened, he might be the first target. But he still couldn't leave him.

Then again, he thought, as a smile broke over his lips. I never thought I'd get kidnapped by someone on his side.

Thinking back, he realized it had begun eight years ago. Uzuki's guardian Iwatsuki had urged Junya to keep his distance.

Junya had discovered his own weakness and could only surrender himself to the tides of fate. But he wasn't going to let what had happened then, happen again.

He was surprised by his own courage in this crisis. Of course, when the gun had been aimed at him, his fingers had trembled and he'd felt an urge to flee. But he hadn't done it.

Unlike eight years ago.

When he had let adults decide his life for him, and had sealed away his own feelings.

He and Uzuki hadn't been brought back together only to part again.

Junya clutched his cell phone, then slipped it into his pocket unused.

Chapter Five

The promised hour came and, right at midnight, Junya heard a key rattle in the lock and the metal door swung open.

The man who appeared in the door surveyed the room. He wore dark sunglasses despite the hour and a black leather jacket. He pushed the door shut with his back and let out a sigh. He held the gun against his chest with one hand, and carried a duffel bag and a shopping bag from a convenience store in the other hand.

"Is someone chasing you?" Junya asked.

Inazumi's body shuddered visibly. He looked as if he'd forgotten Junya was there. Junya could see how rattled he was even with his sunglasses covering his face, and didn't dare say another word.

"None of your business."

Inazumi took a quiet, deep breath, then casually pulled his sunglasses off and slipped them into his pocket. He flopped down at one of the desks. "I bet you're starving."

Before Junya could answer, Inazumi rummaged inside the shopping bag and threw something at him. Two rice balls landed in front of him. Then Inazumi threw a plastic bottle of iced tea at him.

"There ya go."

Inazumi took a bowl of soba noodle soup out of

the bag as well. He pulled back the lid and snapped his chopsticks apart. They didn't break neatly and were of two different lengths, which gave him trouble as he began eating.

But, watching him out of the corner of his eye, Junya saw that the reason he was having trouble was not simply because of his chopsticks. He was holding them very unnaturally.

The upper chopstick crossed the lower and because of that, he could only hold a small amount of noodles at a time. As a result, he had to bring his face very close to the bowl to eat. This childlike way of eating made Junya smile, just a bit.

"What?"

Noticing his stare, Inazumi turned to look at him dubiously. "Quit staring and eat."

"Sorry."

Junya picked up one of the rice balls. As soon as he'd peeled back the plastic wrapper, he realized how hungry he was. He suddenly remembered that he hadn't eaten in a whole day. He took a big bite and instantly began salivating. He polished the first one off quickly and attacked the next.

Convenience store rice was pretty tasteless and, until now, Junya had never really liked it. But for the first time he discovered how unbelievably delicious it could be when one was hungry.

He was thirsty, too. He guzzled down half the bottle of tea at once and finally began to feel alive again.

"You done?"

Inazumi walked over to him.

Junya stayed seated on the sofa, cross-legged. He looked up into Inazumi's face. Inazumi pointed the gun at his upturned forehead.

"You ready?"

The mood that had dominated until only a moment before evaporated in a flash of tension. Junya answered the quiet question with a nod.

"Then get out of here. Here's some compensation."

He dropped the duffel bag heavily in front of the sofa. "Don't go home for a while. And don't even think about contacting Uzuki. He's going to have a lot to deal with soon anyway."

"Did you get your revenge yet?"

"That's none of your business!"

A chill ran down Junya's spine.

Inazumi brushed his hair out of his face agitatedly.

"Not yet. But soon."

Junya felt momentarily relieved at this information. There was still time.

"Once you leave this room, you're going to forget all about me and the Koryu Alliance."

"I can't do that."

Inazumi's eyes widened at Junya's words.

"I guess you didn't mean it when you said you were ready."

"Yes, I did."

"Then—"

"I am ready. But not to do what you thought."

"Wh-what?"

Junya waited until the gun slipped from his forehead, then unfolded his legs to stand up tall. He spoke his mind boldly. "I've been thinking all day. I asked myself what would be best. I can't deny that I'm a burden on Uzuki. But I can't leave him."

"Are you stupid?"

"I know I sound like it," Junya shot back. "But my life belongs to Uzuki. I can't just do whatever is easiest."

He took a step forward, his chains rattling.

Uzuki had tried to leave Junya once, after they'd been reunited. That had been right after the chief's right-hand man had been assassinated.

There was a possibility that not only Uzuki, but Junya also would become a target, just because he was close to him. They had been forced to face the terror that Uzuki might not be able to protect Junya.

It wasn't that Uzuki had gone soft.

Unlike when they were younger, it had just been a recognition of what they feared. An acknowledgment of the limits of their power.

"And Uzuki Kobayakawa isn't the sort of man who would lose his edge just because of me."

"What?"

"He decided not to take revenge—not because he's afraid of dying, but to protect you and your entire gang."

"I'm not going to listen to this! What do you know?" Inazumi shouted.

"It should mean something when you risk your life. But it also means something when you decide

you shouldn't risk your life. He's trying to find a way to reconcile with a hated enemy. I think he regrets this man's death more than anyone, but he doesn't let it show. He's choosing the path that protects everybody. Even an outsider like me can see it's not an easy decision for Uzuki. How can you not see it, after all the time you've spent beside him?"

Inazumi's eyebrows knit together tightly, his lips pressed together and twisting.

He does understand. How could he not? Uzuki trusts him. He wants the best for Uzuki and the gang, like Iwatsuki did.

"So please don't go against Uzuki's plans. He would be more upset than anyone if you died. In the end, I know Uzuki will help you deal with your regrets."

"Shut up!"

With a dull crack, a burning pain erupted in Junya's temple. He fell back onto the sofa, staring up at Inazumi.

Gripping the gun in his left hand, Inazumi slinked closer to Junya. He put one hand onto the sofa and shoved the gun's barrel under Junya's chin.

"I don't want your opinions. Your choices have now been reduced to one. You say you don't want to leave the boss? Then you're going to have to die."

"I can do anything for Uzuki. But I can't throw my life away. And—and do you think Uzuki is going to be happy when he hears what you've done?"

"Didn't I just say I don't want to hear your opinions?"

"Ow!"

Inazumi had swung and punched Junya once more. Without a moment's pause, Inazumi grabbed Junya's shirt and dragged him back up, bringing his face closer.

"You seduced him with looks like that, didn't you?"

He was so close now their eyelashes were nearly touching. Inazumi broke into a cruel grin. The intense smell of tobacco and stale sweat tickled Junya's nose.

"Maybe I ought to have my way with you, then give you back to him."

He licked his lips. Junya shuddered at the threat. "You wouldn't."

"I wouldn't joke about a thing like that," Inazumi said forcefully. "If you suffered a shame worse than death, you wouldn't be able to face Uzuki-sama again, would you?"

He traced the line of Junya's jaw with the gun, then let it fall to his chest. He tore Junya's shirt open, sending buttons flying. Feeling the cold on his freshly exposed skin sent a shudder down Junya's spine. Inazumi's eyes showed no enthusiasm. Maybe he really was going to rape Junya and then toss him back to Uzuki.

"Uzuki wouldn't just ignore something like that."

"You think I don't know that?" Inazumi roared. His voice shook with anger dredged from the pit of his body and Junya withered. "I don't need you to tell me that!"

He hit Junya again and Junya fell to his knees. Inazumi stood before him and pressed the gun into his face.

"I thought a long time about this, and this is my decision. I can't change it now. I wouldn't be here if it weren't for the old man, anyway. I wouldn't be alive if it weren't for Uzuki-sama. I've always been meant to die. I'll consider myself lucky if it's the boss who kills me."

Junya saw himself reflected in the man's wide-open eyes. The flames of Inazumi's passion burned deep within them.

The first time they'd met, he'd seemed prickly. He almost felt that he could get cut just by touching the man. That had left a strong impression on Junya.

"I bet you were born in an ordinary family, had an ordinary childhood, and lived an ordinary life up till now. You can't even imagine my life. You don't know the first thing about it."

Junya choked back any response to Inazumi's statement.

"The only ones who appreciated me were the Koryu Alliance and people like the old man. That's why I offer my life for theirs. If my death will open Uzuki-sama's eyes, I'll die gladly."

Even Inazumi's prickly heart had been touched by Uzuki.

Junya could almost understand the way Inazumi had felt in his youth. He'd been sad. Emptiness had been eating away at him, and he'd had no one to fill it for him. The one who'd reached out to him was the old man.

And Uzuki.

Inazumi's hand brushed Junya's skin. Avoiding the wounds he'd caused with his blows, his fingers touched Junya's face. He swept his bangs to one side

and, as Junya's eyes grew wider, brought his face closer to the exposed skin.

Junya knew he had to get away from him, but he couldn't move.

"You did say you would do anything for Uzuki-sama, didn't you?"

"I did."

Junya showed no hesitation at this question, which seemed to be testing him.

"Then go down on me."

"What?!" Junya stared up at Inazumi, shocked.

"Now that I look closer, you don't look half bad. This is the mouth that sucked his thing. It grosses me out to think about having sex with a guy, but I could never tell the boss that."

Junya's heart ached at these words, which were completely understandable from a certain point of view. Junya was the first to hesitate at the homosexuality of their relationship. But after pursuing and being pursued for so long, he had been forced to accept it.

He wouldn't have minded Inazumi rejecting that, but insulting Uzuki was unacceptable. He was struck by the sudden urge to scream at Inazumi that he was the one who didn't know what he was talking about.

"But if you can satisfy me, I may have to change my opinion."

That implied that he didn't think Junya could do it.

Junya couldn't back down now.

With the chains still around his wrists, Junya, still on his knees, moved closer to Inazumi. He reached for

the zipper of his pants.

"If you want to stop, say so now."

There was a hint of hesitation in Inazumi's voice. Junya glanced up at him. "You said you were serious? Well, so am I."

Junya honestly loved Uzuki. He honestly wanted to protect him.

"Let's see it, then."

Inazumi pressed his hand harder against Junya's head, pushing his face down to his hips. Junya unzipped him.

Even through the boxer shorts he wore, Junya could see Inazumi's shape. Junya touched his rigid organ through the cloth, which sent shudders through Inazumi.

A sensation quite different from pleasure spread through him. If he had to give it a name, he would have called it degradation. He was touching another man's penis while he thought of Uzuki, in order to help Uzuki. His mind told him to accept that, but his heart refused to.

What would Uzuki think if he found out about this? Would he blame Junya? Or Inazumi? Or even himself?

Junya was sure that if he found out, Uzuki would understand.

He hoped Uzuki would understand.

Swallowing the bile that threatened to fill his mouth, Junya slowly stretched his tongue out to the fabric of Inazumi's boxers.

He could feel the powerful pulses of Inazumi's

blood through his tongue. He moved his tongue. And Inazumi's member began to react. Tension twitched through the fingers resting on Junya's head.

Junya reached through the slit in Inazumi's underwear to touch his organ. He felt the authentic warmth and sensation of human skin.

He fought back the impulse to flee from this and gently drew Inazumi's organ out. It was different from Uzuki's, and from his own as well. Junya tentatively stretched his tongue out to it.

He heard a slight intake of breath above him. This inspired Junya: he closed his eyes and carefully licked Inazumi's manhood. He pressed his lips gently around the head, eliciting a powerful pulse in response. Inazumi reacted to the motions of his tongue and teeth, growing harder as Junya watched.

"Damn it," Inazumi groaned. He put his hand onto the back of Junya's head and pulled him closer. "Nngh."

Inazumi's organ slipped deep into his throat and Junya felt himself gagging. Tears started in the corners of his eyes. He coughed, feeling like he might throw up, but Inazumi wouldn't let him pull back.

"Use your throat. This isn't good enough to convince me yet."

He grabbed Junya's hair viciously, pushing his head forward, pressing him past his limits.

"You said you would do anything for him, didn't you? Then this is nothing!"

His shout was filled with anguish.

Holding Inazumi's organ in his mouth, Junya



raised his eyes to see his expression.

Deep wrinkles creased his forehead in a look of intense concentration. He bit down on his lip. Junya saw no trace of pleasure in his face.

"What're you looking at?"

Noticing Junya's stare, Inazumi tore Junya off of him. He dragged him back to the sofa and, still erect, ripped Junya's shirt off.

"Ah!"

Inazumi reached out to touch his exposed chest.

"You've got such pretty skin." He spoke coldly, without the slightest change in expression. "Does the boss suck your skin here?"

His palm was pressed flat against Junya's chest and began moving slowly down. At the touch of another person's warmth, something that had been peacefully slumbering beneath Junya's skin began to awaken.

"Don't get in the way."

Junya had put a hand on Inazumi's shoulder, but the man knocked it away and draped his chain over the back of the sofa.

"Inazumi-san—"

With both of Junya's hands pinned over his head, Inazumi's hand moved toward Junya's groin.

He slipped open the belt buckle and moved to the zipper. He grabbed Junya's organ roughly through the cloth.

"Nngh!"

"Hey, you're already hard."

The blundering movement of his fingers was painful, but it sent an intense sensation coursing through

Junya. Junya stretched his legs out reflexively. Inazumi apparently found that annoying and blocked them on either side with his own legs. He pushed Junya back onto the cushions.

Junya tried to resist as the man loomed over him.

"Stop it!"

"Shut up!"

Inazumi's hand closed around Junya's jaw. Then, without any further prelude, Inazumi's lips covered his own.

"Nnh!"

His tongue was heavy with the scent of exotic spiced cigarettes as he explored Junya's mouth.

It was completely different from the way Uzuki kissed him. It wasn't a motion intended to make Junya feel good, but instead a violent searching. Still, his body reacted to the overpowering movements of the man's tongue.

Why am I doing this? Why don't I resist?

The image of Uzuki's face tickled at the edges of his mind. The feeling of his hands reawakened on Junya's skin.

Everything was different than it was with Uzuki. But still his body responded.

He tried desperately to push back the man looming over him, but Inazumi didn't even flinch. He was determined.

"No—!"

A cry of resistance fought up from Junya's throat, but died off.

His tongue evaded, but Inazumi's followed,

capturing him. And when the man stimulated the weakest part of him, Junya reacted with pathetic eagerness.

Inazumi was being noisy in order to excite Junya. He was attacking him with obscene sounds and the sensation of his tongue. And Junya's member was swelling with excitement, whether he liked it or not.

Looking down at Junya's reacting body, Inazumi raised his eyebrows and moved his hands. His hands followed the line of Junya's body, stopping over his dick.

Inazumi's fingers traced the shape of it through the cloth and Junya's hips twitched. *More*: the thought coursed not through Junya's mind, but through his body.

"Inazumi..."

"Stop moving or you'll get hurt."

His husky voice sent a thrilling pulse through Junya.

The way Inazumi looked at him was very different from the way Uzuki did.

Confusion, anger, sadness—a chaotic mix of emotions poured over Junya. If he lashed out suddenly, he might be able to get away. But Inazumi's eyes sapped the resistance from him.

Junya mentally begged for salvation as Inazumi touched his body. The unstoppable impulses drove a scream out of him. And so he could not resist.

As if sensing his hesitation, the cell phone in Junya's pocket chose that moment to ring.

Inazumi stood up and turned away, zipping his pants back up. He reached into Junya's pants pocket and

took out the phone. He looked at the screen, then silently held it out to Junya.

"U." It was Uzuki.

"You can answer."

Junya's reaction must have made it clear to Inazumi who was calling. He threw the phone onto the sofa and walked away from Junya.

"Inazumi..."

"You can tell Uzuki that you're with me and you need help," Inazumi spoke casually, stopping in front of the window to light a cigarette. Seeing him from behind like this, hunched over, made him look somehow small.

The phone kept ringing.

Junya picked it up in silence and answered the call. "Hello?"

"What are you doing? You pick up as soon as I call you!"

It sounded like Uzuki was in a car.

He was the same as always. The sound of his voice made Junya want to cry.

"Junya?"

Junya was surprised by the suspicion in Uzuki's voice. "Sorry, I—I'm with a coworker right now."

Inazumi stiffened at this response.

"Well, when you're done there, come to the hotel."

His voice was cheerful, as if something good had happened to him. Junya wanted to see him—right now, as soon as he could. But glancing once more at Inazumi's back, he bundled that impulse up silently and pushed it deep into his heart.

There was something he had to do before he saw Uzuki again.

"I'm sorry, but I can't come today."

Inazumi twitched.

"What? You're going to put some coworker ahead of me?"

His tone was a little aggrieved, but still affectionate. Normally he wouldn't have been so understanding—why was he indulging Junya, this of all times?

Maybe he was a little drunk.

"Yeah."

"You're quick to admit it."

Junya treasured this flippant conversation.

"Can you call when you have time again?"

"Of course. In fact, why don't you call me?"

"But I never know when it's okay to call you."

"If it's you, I'll pick up any time. Even if I'm in the middle of a shoot-out."

Junya knew it was a joke, but at a time like this, all it did was send a chill down his spine.

"Is that going to happen?"

"It was just an example. You can't take every detail of what I say seriously. Geez."

He heard Uzuki's tender laugh.

"I love you."

His whispered confession sent thrills down Junya's spine.

"You, too."

Junya loved Uzuki more than words could say. These last two days, he had been forced to face his feelings.

"Don't say another word." Uzuki cut him off, laughing. "I want to hear you say it in person. Save it for next time."

Unable to say when that next time would be, Junya hung up.

"Why didn't you tell him?!" Inazumi shouted. He spun around and threw his cigarette onto the floor, crushing it under his foot.

"If you'd told Uzuki where you are right now, if you told him who you're with, you could have saved your life! Why did you—"

"Did you want me to tell him?"

"What?"

Inazumi fell silent. His face hardened, making his agitation plain to see.

I was right. That knowledge gave Junya courage.

"If I'd told Uzuki, what would you have done? You would have just shot me before I hung up and then gone to take your revenge."

"Of course I would have."

"I don't want to get shot. And I don't want to let you go all alone into enemy territory. That's why I didn't tell him."

"How dare you!" Inazumi raised his hand. Junya knew he was about to hit him, but he didn't look away. "Damn it!"

Junya's face was turned to the side with the force of Inazumi's blow to his cheek. He fought back the pain, tightly gripping the cell phone, his last connection to Uzuki. He stopped the trembling in his fingertips and prayed desperately to the man whose voice he had heard

so recently. *Please, give me strength.*

"Uzuki told me that no one wants to commit suicide. I understand how you feel. But he said that in order to appease those feelings, he has to bring things to a close in a calm and deliberate manner. You still want to betray Uzuki when he feels that way?"

"How many times do I have to tell you that it's none of your business?!"

Junya could almost hear the sound of Inazumi's teeth grinding together.

He heard the click of the gun's gears as Inazumi aimed it at him.

He was getting used to this, after two days of this scene repeating over and over again. He was still afraid, but it surprised him how collected he was. His concern for Inazumi was stronger than his fear.

"Please reconsider." He stared at the gun. "I recognize that my existence puts Uzuki in danger. So I'm ready for whatever happens next. I'll do everything in my power to protect Uzuki. All I ever wanted was to not be a burden to Uzuki. You feel that way too, don't you? You're doing all this for Uzuki. So please reconsider. Is this really going to make Uzuki happy? Do you want to watch him suffer? Has Uzuki really been so naïve in his decisions?"

Maybe in reality, Junya had no right to say these things as an outsider. But he wanted Inazumi to give this plan up. He wanted him to understand Uzuki's feelings.

"Please don't do anything to make Uzuki sad. Don't do anything to make him have regrets. Please help me protect him."

"Shut up!"

Inazumi swung his fist back. It struck Junya sharply on the chin, knocking his head violently back into the wall.

The intense shock and pain showered Junya's vision in silver sparks.

"Inazumi—"

There were still things that had to be said. There were things he had to tell him. These words echoed in Junya's mind, but his body wouldn't move. His field of vision was collapsing in on itself.

"You're not very smart," Inazumi murmured. "But I'm even stupider."

If Inazumi knew he was being stupid, why didn't he stop? Why didn't he try to fix things? The questions rose in Junya's mind, but he couldn't form them in his mouth.

"I'm going to tell you something."

Inazumi was standing beside Junya's head.

"Once a month, that murdering bastard goes out alone, at five o'clock sharp, to go see the kids he has with one of his girlfriends."

His words came in a whisper.

"When he goes, he never has anyone with him. A car comes to pick him up at his house, then drops him off at his destination. The car has bullet-proof glass. There's only one opening: when he gets into the car and when he gets out. And that once-in-a-month opportunity is tomorrow night."

Before Junya could process the meaning of Inazumi's words, his mind grew cloudy.

"I'm too weak to turn back now."

It was a statement of self-pity.

"And all I wanted was to entrust my fate to you."

Junya heard grinding footsteps, then the sound of the iron door closing before he lost consciousness.

Chapter Six

"Ow."

As Junya moved, dull pain shot through his body. He put a hand to where it hurt, but he felt strange.

He woke with a start, realizing why. The handcuffs and chains that had bound him had been removed from his arms and legs.

"Inazumi!"

He looked around the room for the man who had confined him, but found no one.

He had a terrible feeling.

Junya stepped down from the sofa. The moment he moved his head, he was struck by monumental dizziness. He took a few steps forward, then pressed his hands against his head: it ached violently. Inazumi had hit him so many times that even the slightest pressure sent intense pain coursing through his body.

Despite that, he hurried to turn on the light and look around the room. There was no one there, and no one in the bathroom either.

The room was completely empty. Even Inazumi's cigarette butts were gone.

Light shone in through the window. It looked to Junya like the sun was beginning to wane. Checking his watch quickly, he saw it was three in the afternoon. He had been unconscious for more than twelve hours.

In that time, Inazumi had disappeared.

Junya remembered calling out to him as he left.

It took no time at all to figure out where Inazumi was going. Tension coursed through Junya's body.

He searched frantically for his cell phone and called Uzuki. He was nearly out of battery power.

He needed to tell Uzuki as soon as possible. Uzuki had to know.

The phone rang for a dismaying length of time. Uzuki was probably asleep in his hotel room right now.

Junya was crazed with impatience. *Wake up!* he wanted to shout through the phone.

Suddenly, he heard a familiar voice. "Man, what do you want? I'm busy right now. Call back later."

"Uzuki! No, Uzuki! Wait!"

He knew he was shouting, but Uzuki didn't hang up.

Junya's thoughts crowded his mind. He had no idea where to begin.

Tears streamed down his face and he sobbed. He had never wanted to cry, even while Inazumi had beat him and everything else. But now, just hearing Uzuki's voice was the most reassuring thing in the world.

And so Junya wanted to cry. He knew that there was absolutely no time to waste on crying, but the tears came anyway.

"Why are you crying at me?"

Junya heard the sound of a lighter followed by the exhalation of air. He saw Uzuki in his mind's eye brushing the hair from his forehead in annoyance, but grudgingly talking to him.

At the same moment, Junya felt Uzuki's scent and warmth spreading through his body.

"If you cry, I can't understand what you're trying to tell me. You need to calm down."

Uzuki understood, without Junya saying a word.

Junya took several deep, calming breaths and wiped his tears away.

He arranged everything he needed to say in his mind and then chose his words. He worried about what Uzuki was doing while he regained his composure. He heard the noise of a crowd on the other end of the line.

"Is something going on?"

"You could say that," Uzuki replied casually. Listening hard, Junya could hear Iwatsuki's voice far in the background.

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have called."

"But you did, and I said I would answer even if I was in the middle of a shoot-out. So what is it? I'm in a hurry."

"It's about Inazumi."

"Inazumi?" Uzuki's voice got suddenly louder. "How do you know Inazumi?"

"I'll explain later. Do you know where he is right now?"

"We're looking for him."

"Why?"

Goosebumps prickled his entire body.

"He called Iwatsuki, so we're trying to find him."

"Did you know he's got a gun?"

"How do you—?" Uzuki lowered his voice. The surprise in his voice told Junya that Inazumi had been

acting entirely on his own.

"He told me he's going to get revenge on the man who killed a person he called 'the old man.'"

"He wouldn't—!" Uzuki howled. "Do you know anything else? Did he tell you anything else?"

"He said the man he's after goes once a month to see the children of one of his girlfriends at five o'clock."

"One of his girlfriends? Iwatsuki, did you hear all that?"

"Yes sir. I'll investigate immediately." Iwatsuki's voice, too, was unusually agitated.

"He said that was the only time the guy was alone."

"That should be enough to find him. Where are you, Junya?"

"Some building in Shinjuku, I think."

"Can you tell me anything more specific than that?"

Junya hurried to the window. He searched for something distinctive and caught sight of a brightly-lit green net.

"I can see a batting cage below me and to the right."

"What else? It doesn't matter what, just tell me what you see."

"There's a convenience store. And a parking lot..."

He had to find more. But the more strongly he thought that, the more clouded his vision became.

"What else?"

"Uzuki, can you find Inazumi?"

His voice was frail, squeezed out of him with all his power.

Uzuki reassured him. "You don't need to worry about that anymore. We'll take care of everything."

"Please find him." That was Junya's only wish. "Please, I'm begging you. Find Inazumi before—"

There was a loud beep as the battery died. There was no phone in the room.

All Junya could do now was be patient.

Inazumi's last words before parting rang in his ears. He was too weak to turn back now. And he'd entrusted Junya with his fate. He truly didn't want to kill his enemy. Junya wanted to believe that.

He sank into the couch, leaning forward to hold his head in his hands. He clung to the cell phone that would never ring and prayed.

He didn't know how much time went by after that.

There was a sudden banging on the iron door. Junya looked up in shock.

"Junya, are you in there?"

Junya's entire body trembled at the sound of Uzuki's voice.

"Junya! If you're in there, answer me!"

Uzuki's voice ran through his body like electricity. He trembled to the very tips of his fingers and his knees shook. *I've been waiting. I knew, somehow, you would find me.*

His heart and body welcomed him.

"Uzuki—"

He stumbled toward the door.

"Uzuki!"

"Junya! Is that you?"

Junya pressed his hands against the door and, though he knew Uzuki couldn't see him, nodded. "How did you find me?"

"I'll explain later. Unlock the door."

"No!"

The knob shook several times, but it did no good.

"What?"

"I think there's a trap on this side of the door. I don't know what'll happen if I try to open it from this side."

"Damn it. Iwatsuki!"

Junya heard Uzuki talking a slight distance from the door, but couldn't make out what he said.

It was nearly four o'clock. There was barely one hour left before Inazumi acted.

"Uzuki, what about Inazumi?"

"I have people looking for him."

"You can come back for me later. You have to—"

"I know," he answered forcefully. "I'm going to rescue you, then go straight to where Inazumi is. Don't worry about it."

Sometimes the arrogant tone of Uzuki's orders touched a nerve. He may have been the leader of a gang, but even in an equal relationship, he acted superior. Junya should have been annoyed by it, but right now he was just grateful to hear Uzuki at all.

If Uzuki said it, it was true. He would do something. Junya believed that.

"Can you hear me, Junya?"

"Yes," Junya answered clearly.

"We're going to force the lock, so get as far away from the door as you can. Go into another room, if there is one."

"What do you mean, you're going to force it?"

"I'll explain later. We're going to count to ten, so find some cover. One! Two!" Uzuki ignored Junya's question and started the countdown. "Take cover!"

There was no time to lose. Even now, the count continued.

Junya searched the room, then decided to hide in the bathroom. He shut the door and covered his head. He didn't know how they were going to break the lock, but it was obviously going to be something dangerous.

"Nine! *Ten!*"

There was a terrifying noise. The entire building shook and flakes fell from the ceiling in the bathroom.

Junya was sure a shock like that was going to raise suspicions.

He peeked through a crack in the door and saw billows of dust filling the room.

"Oh, my God."

Bits of the wall had fallen down and one of the desks that had sat in the center of the room was overturned. Dust sprinkled down from the ceiling, as well.

"Junya!"

The sound of his name shook him from his shock.

"Junya! Are you okay?"

Junya could make out a figure coming through the clouds of dust.

The iron door lay on the floor surrounded by a section of the wall. A man wearing a two-piece suit came into the room. Hair hung chaotically across his forehead. His face transformed as soon as he saw Junya.

"Are you hurt, Junya?"

Uzuki ran up to him and closed Junya in his arms unhesitatingly, holding him against his body.

"Uzuki—"

"How did you get mixed up in this? I was so worried—are you trying to kill me?"

Uzuki stroked Junya's back, petting his head over and over.

It hadn't been that long since they'd last seen each other. But this was the first time they'd been reunited after thinking they might never see each other again.

Junya steeped himself in Uzuki's scent and the warmth of his body. "Uzuki—"

Uzuki lifted Junya's face with a finger and his expression changed. "What happened to you?" He frowned, reaching to touch the wound on Junya's forehead.

"Ow."

Junya's face scrunched up with pain and Uzuki jerked his hand back in surprise. But his eyes stayed fixed on Junya.

"You're hurt everywhere—your head, your cheek, your lips..."

Uzuki's face seemed to twist with even greater



pain than Junya felt. He reached out to him, but Junya could see his fingers shaking and they stopped just a breath away from touching him. He stared at Junya, as if some memory had come back to him, and he slowly opened his mouth.

"Did Inazumi do this?"

Junya's body trembled faintly at the sound of the man's name.

Uzuki would never believe it if he denied it. So instead, Junya asked what was going on. "Is he—?"

Uzuki's eyes slid to Iwatsuki, who was standing discreetly to one side. Iwatsuki's eyebrows wrinkled slightly and he whispered something in Uzuki's ear. Uzuki nodded, then turned back to Junya.

"We've finally got a good idea of where he might be. We're going to go find him now. Are you coming along?"

"Yes."

There was no hesitation. Junya couldn't imagine what he would do when they got there. But Inazumi's last words rang in his ears and he could not ignore them.

"Then come with me."

Without another word, Uzuki held Junya's arm and led him from the decimated room.

After his first step outside, Junya realized where he had been.

All of his concern for the other residents in the building and whether Uzuki should have blown up the door were for nothing.

Even Junya recognized this place as one of

Shinjuku's abandoned buildings.

"This entire area's been scheduled for redevelopment, and all the buildings around here are going to be demolished." Uzuki explained exactly what Junya had been wondering as they descended the rusty stairs. "No one's gonna care that we busted down the door or destroyed the room. And our company is involved with the redevelopment project of this building. Not officially, of course."

That was how Inazumi had known about this place.

A black Toyota Century waited outside the site. Uzuki got in first and Junya hurried in after him. Uzuki reached out one hand across the seats and tangled his fingers, one by one, with Junya's and squeezed tight.

"Uzuki."

There was a barrier between them and the driver's seat. Uzuki pushed a button and it slid shut.

"Let's go."

"Yes, sir."

The car began moving at Uzuki's order. He almost seemed to have been waiting for that: in the next moment, he reached out once again for Junya's chin and peered into his face.

"Uz—"

Before Junya could finish saying his name, Uzuki covered Junya's lips with his own. He held both his arms and sucked desperately on his lips.

"Mm!"

Junya's back was pressed into the seat and, unable to move in the slightest, their tongues tangled together.

He whimpered under the force of the kiss, which granted him not even enough time to snatch a breath.

The feeling of their lips pressed together, of the movements of Uzuki's tongue, and the spreading taste of tobacco in his mouth—all these things were distinctively Uzuki.

Junya resisted for a moment, but it was only for show. He quickly accepted the man's kiss.

He rested both his arms on Uzuki's shoulders and matched the movements of the man's tongue with his own. They tangled, each exploring the other, when Uzuki pulled back reluctantly. His tongue flicked out to lick the cut beside Junya's lip.

"Ow."

There was a sharp, momentary pain. Uzuki's tongue moved on to his cheek, then his forehead, deliberately prodding him.

"Uzuki! That hurts."

"Of course it does. I want it to."

Junya stared at him. "What?"

"You belong to me," Uzuki said boldly. "I won't let people damage my property."

Obviously, there were many things Junya wanted to say about that. But since Uzuki didn't ask him about his time with Inazumi, he didn't pursue it. They were just bold words born of his pity for Junya. His heart warmed.

No matter how harsh the words, Uzuki's large hand caressed Junya's cheek affectionately, careful to avoid his injuries. The tenderness that carried all the way to the tips of his fingers soothed Junya's spirit and

told him of Uzuki's pain.

"I'm sorry."

"An apology's not good enough."

Even as he said these harsh words, Uzuki's arms enfolded Junya with incredible kindness. He felt himself turning to mush.

"He didn't hurt you anywhere I haven't touched yet, did he?"

Junya's forehead was pressed against his shoulders, transmitting a faint tremble to Uzuki's body.

Junya keenly felt the anxiety of this man who was both stronger and kinder than anyone else he knew. He was the one responsible for causing Uzuki such worry. He realized again just how much distress he had caused him.

"I couldn't reach you by phone. I thought you were dead."

"I'm sorry."

No matter how often he apologized, it would never be enough.

Junya squeezed Uzuki, who squeezed him tightly, appreciating his warmth. He felt Uzuki's heartbeat through their chests. Just like during sex, their two heartbeats overlapped. Knowing he was not alone gave Junya inordinate strength. At the same time, he reaffirmed his desire to protect this person, who cared about him more than any other.

"What happened?"

Junya heard Uzuki's voice low against his ear. The strength in Uzuki's arms gave him the resolve to speak. "I first met Inazumi at Number Five."

"When was this?"

"The day we were supposed to go to the Japanese steakhouse together."

If Junya had told Uzuki about Inazumi the next day, when Uzuki had come to see Junya himself, all of this could have been avoided. But it was too late for regrets now.

So Junya described as clearly and honestly as he could, everything that had happened between his first encounter with Inazumi and last night. He included not only the facts, but Inazumi's feelings as well.

He told Uzuki how Inazumi wanted to tear Junya away from him and, more importantly, how much Inazumi mourned the murder of the man who had been his mentor.

"What an idiot." Uzuki pounded his fist into the seat. "Why can't he understand that everyone feels that way?"

In an explosive display of anger, Uzuki kicked the seat in front of him. It pained Junya to see how much Uzuki regretted not being able to communicate his feelings to Inazumi. "I think he does understand that."

"Then why is he doing something so stupid?"

"He understands, but maybe he still felt like things were unbalanced."

"Unbalanced?" Uzuki looked at Junya dubiously.

In that very last moment, at least, Inazumi had hesitated. That was why he had said those things to Junya. "I'm not Inazumi, so I can't explain very well, but I think he understands how you feel. He just doesn't agree."

Junya thought for a moment, then continued.

"No, wait. I think maybe he understands it intellectually, but he can't accept it emotionally. So he blamed everything on me in order to clear up his guilt."

Half a year had gone by since the murder of the right-hand man. That was more than enough time to accept the reality of it. But the fact that Inazumi hadn't yet accepted it didn't make him stupid.

"But how is any of that your fault?"

"I wasn't the only one he blamed." Junya shrugged.

"Then why—"

"Inazumi called him his 'old man,'" Junya interrupted Uzuki's anger.

"Oh yeah." Uzuki was quiet for a moment, but finally he pulled away from Junya and cradled his head on his knees. "He was like a father to Inazumi. But he's not the only one who misses him. Me, Iwatsuki, even my damn father loved him. And now..."

Uzuki's shoulders were shaking visibly.

"Uzuki—"

"As soon as we found out who killed him, I was ready to strike back against anyone who got in our way. I didn't care what happened to the gang. As long as we killed the guy responsible, that was enough. But we can't do that."

Uzuki tightened his fist and thumped it against his knee.

"I'm not just leading the group. I've got thousands of people behind me. If I ran off on a momentary outrage, all of Kabuki-cho would become a war zone."

And then I wouldn't be the only one to die. The old man was protecting my father, too. If my father got killed, the Koryu Alliance would have to start a war just to save face. But he prevented that. With his dying breath, he told me not to take revenge."

Uzuki covered his face with his great hands. But he couldn't hide the tears running down his cheeks. Junya reached out to gently touch his face. He was as tender as possible, trying not to spook him.

"He did?"

"He said...don't let Inazumi avenge me. Or anyone else. He didn't want anyone to risk their lives for him."

Uzuki suddenly looked very small.

Junya couldn't bear to see him like this, shaking, with tears running down his face. He wrapped his arms around him. He pressed Uzuki's head against his chest and stroked his hair. He knew he wasn't capable of much, but he could comfort Uzuki while he wept. He wouldn't let him cry alone.

Uzuki's arms slowly circled Junya. His fingers dug into his back. Uzuki was clinging to him like a child.

"So I-I've been doing everything I could to carry out his wishes. I don't want to watch anyone else die. And not just my own guys. When he was killed, I-I saw you beside him."

"Me?"

Uzuki fought back a sob to speak. His words resounded in Junya's heart: he had truly suffered. He had felt as much sorrow at losing the man as Inazumi had, and perhaps even more.

"I tried to distance myself from you then."

"I know."

"I was never going to come back."

"I understand."

Holding Junya's arms, Uzuki looked up at him. He stared straight at Junya, not trying to hide his tear-stained face. "If there was even the slightest chance that I'd put your life in danger, it seemed better to just stay away from you. But you said you wouldn't leave."

"Yeah, I did."

"You said you were giving me your life."

"Yes."

"You said you would love me."

"Because that's all I have to give you, Uzuki."

Uzuki reached out to Junya's face with both hands.

Junya realized that he was crying, too. Uzuki's big hands stroked his wet cheeks. That act showed an emotion more tender and affectionate than Junya had felt even when they kissed, or even when they had sex.

These hands, which knew how to beat and kill people, also knew how to be gentle.

That was why Junya loved this man. Behind his rough speech, Uzuki hid a delicate heart. Junya found that charming.

"That's why I have to be stronger, no matter what. If it makes me stronger, bowing to that bastard is nothing. I'll bow as much as I need to in order to protect you and everyone in my gang. Pride is worthless."

"I'm sure Inazumi will understand," Junya said quietly. "He'll understand everything you've told me."

Only now did Junya wonder if Inazumi had truly intended to kill him when he'd kidnapped him.

He'd honestly wanted to free himself from his turmoil and honestly wanted to throw his life away. He'd used Junya to try and toughen Uzuki up. He'd wanted to kill Junya and, after carrying out his goal, be killed himself.

That would have wrapped everything up neatly.

If everything had gone according to his plan, they would have lost the lives of Inazumi, Junya, and the man who'd killed the Koryu Alliance's right-hand man. Inazumi would've punished himself and closed the cycle of revenge. But it hadn't worked.

Now that Inazumi was alone, who knew what he would decide to do? Junya wanted to stop him, for Uzuki's sake and for Inazumi's own.

At last, Uzuki's phone rang.

"Yeah?" he answered tonelessly. Then his eyebrows shot up at what the person on the other end told him. "And what about Inazumi?"

Junya's heart pounded at the sound of that name.

"Okay. Stop the car near there." Uzuki hung up and shoved the phone into his pocket. "He's at the location."

Uzuki opened a bottle of the mineral water kept in the car. He moved slightly away from Junya, then poured the entire bottle over his own head.

"What are you doing?"

"I can't let the guys see me looking so pathetic."

He wiped off his wet face with his hands. Junya offered him a handkerchief as Uzuki swept his hair off

his forehead. Uzuki took Junya's hand along with the handkerchief and pulled him toward him, covering him with hungry kisses.

His hair got Junya's face wet. Through half-open eyes, their gazes locked and they watched each other as they kissed.

"Stay in the car."

"No way!"

Junya shook his head quickly.

"What about the things I told you, Junya?"

"I remember." Junya wasn't intimidated by Uzuki's threatening words. "I know you worry about me. But this is all my fault for not stopping Inazumi."

"Of course it's not your fault. You were just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"No, I wasn't!" Junya denied that idea immediately. "I'm with you by my own choice."

Junya withstood the powerful glare Uzuki turned on him.

"I don't want to be a burden on you, so I'm going to take responsibility for my own actions."

"Well, come on then."

"And anyway, if it doesn't work out, you'll save me, won't you Uzuki?"

They stared at each other for a long moment when there was a knock on the window, and Uzuki looked away. "Fine, whatever."

"Uzuki..."

"Just don't do anything I'm going to regret."

Uzuki grabbed Junya's shirt. "If you get in trouble, I'll be right behind you. And if you're so worried about

making things hard for me, don't do anything stupid."

Junya saw himself reflected in Uzuki's eyes. He knew Uzuki was reflected in his own. "I promise."

Even though he said he'd take responsibility for himself, Junya knew that Uzuki was indulging him.

The car door opened.

Chapter Seven

There were several apartment buildings on the block.

The black Century was parked in a vacant lot hidden from the buildings' view. The rest of the cars were parked discreetly, trying not to clump together in one place.

There weren't as many people as Junya had expected, no doubt to avoid the possibility of adding fuel to the fire if they were discovered bearing down on this man in force.

"Is Inazumi here?"

"The guy who killed my father's right-hand man is the son of the second in command of the Hisakata Clan."

Uzuki took stock of the area from their vantage point in the shadows. The gusting wind chilled Junya to the core.

"You've heard of them, right?"

"Yeah."

Their name had appeared in an article Junya had seen on the subway. They were the group battling the Koryu Alliance. But that was the only thing he knew about them.

"He's a playboy. Ten years older than me. His father, the second in command, was concerned over how

reckless and hot-headed his son was, so he sent him to South America. He came back two years ago."

Iwatsuki was talking on a cell phone, standing beside Uzuki, who wore a trench coat and scarf.

"He met a woman there and had children with her, then brought them back to Japan with him when he came back. Trouble is, he already had a wife and kids here. His first wife was upset, so he had to set them up in a separate house."

"Why did he kill your man?"

"I don't know what the politics are like in *their* gang," Uzuki practically spat the words out. "But after he got back, the Hisakata Clan started getting involved in drugs. Kabuki-cho was like an all-you-can-eat buffet to them."

Uzuki frowned. He hated the drug trade.

Junya's entire body tensed as he listened to the story. He scolded himself for letting fear get the better of him at a time like this. He had to face up to the world he lived in now.

"But we have an agreement with them to look the other way about this incident. Of course, we're not the only ones making concessions. They've sworn to cut all ties with the guy Inazumi is after."

"What?"

"And they also provided a bride for you," Iwatsuki interjected.

"Iwatsuki!" Uzuki shouted. "Just 'cause they offered doesn't mean I accepted! They say they're doing it to make peace, but you know they just want to use me to get their hands on Kabuki-cho. No way in hell! Who



do they think I am?" Uzuki grumbled spitefully.

"If they found Kabuki-cho a tempting buffet, they would certainly see you as a mouth-watering dish, Uzuki-sama."

"Don't get carried away with yourself, Iwatsuki." Uzuki glared at Iwatsuki's smiling face. "And don't listen to any of that, Junya. It doesn't matter."

Uzuki lightly tapped Junya's cheek. He was in a daze.

"You're the only one I want."

"I—I know."

He didn't have time to appreciate Uzuki's warmth right now. There were more important things at hand.

"But we don't have time to hash this stupid stuff out right now. We've got to track Inazumi down."

"I'm coming, too," Junya declared. "I'll help you look."

Uzuki folded his arms in front of his chest and raised his eyebrows. "Even if I tried to stop you, you would just ignore me, wouldn't you?" He sighed in defeat and lit a cigarette. "Well, we're not at war with them right now. All we want to do is find one of our guys." He brought his cigarette before his lips. "And this is the target."

He took a photo out of his jacket pocket.

It showed a man in a black suit, his head bowed. He looked to be in his late thirties. He had red-brown hair and a medium build. The photo was taken at a distance, so Junya couldn't make out the details of his face, but he looked like the type who could easily get lost in a crowd.

"I'm not sure if he's changed his hairstyle or not. He's been in hiding the last six months, ever since he murdered our man."

Junya could almost hear Uzuki's teeth grinding.

"Promise me one thing." Uzuki turned to look at Junya. A thread of tension stretched between them. "If you find Inazumi first, whatever you do, don't let the guy he's after see you."

"All right."

Inazumi had a gun. Junya had learned to truly fear that these last few days.

"If you find him, tell me right away."

"But my phone—"

"Use this."

Uzuki put his trench coat around Junya's shoulders and, wrapping his scarf around his neck, he handed him his cell phone. "It's got Iwatsuki's number on it. Call that number if you need to reach me." He ignored Iwatsuki's frowns.

The trench coat smelled like Uzuki.

"To be honest, I don't like letting you go alone," Uzuki said with difficulty.

"I know."

"Don't do anything to make me regret it."

"I won't, I swear."

"Every last hair on your head belongs to me," Uzuki said again.

His fingers reached out to Junya, and touched the cut on his lips.

The tenderness of this barest of sensations gave Junya goosebumps. Then Uzuki turned away.

Junya clenched his fists and ran into the night.

The man's girlfriend lived on the top floor of one of the high-rise apartment buildings.

The front door had an automatic locking system. There was a space in front of the door where cars could pull up.

There were very few possible targets. Most of those were being watched by people from the Koryu Alliance.

How would Inazumi strike his target with all this protection?

The Hisakata Clan had easily sacrificed its second's son, like a lizard cutting off its tail. He must have been a thorn in the gang's side for a while. So even if Inazumi killed him, it would be meaningless.

And if something went wrong, there was the possibility that the Hisakata Clan would take it as an excuse to make trouble for the Koryu Alliance. That was why they wanted to catch Inazumi before he could do anything.

There was a small park on the premises of the apartment building. It was a Sunday evening and children were heading home by ones and twos.

As the sky darkened, the street lamps began to light up.

The seconds ticked by towards five o'clock. Each time a car pulled up to the building, Junya's nerves concentrated on it.

But there was no sign of Inazumi or his enemy. He

had a momentary hope that Inazumi had given the idea up, but knew that was unlikely.

Junya walked around the building. Behind the building was a residents' parking lot. There were several auto-lock doors leading into the building from there.

A red car slid into the parking lot. It was a sedan, a Japanese model. It pulled to a stop and a woman climbed out of it.

She went to the back to open the trunk and pulled out large shopping bags. A little boy burst out of the car's backseat, chasing after the woman.

The boy picked up some bags to help his mother, then joined hands with a man, presumably his father, who had finally gotten out of the passenger's seat. He was an ordinary man of medium build. He wore glasses, making it hard to see his face.

There was nothing remarkable about the scene at all. It looked like a perfectly ordinary family scene.

The woman handed her bags to the man, then got back into the car to park it. She rolled down her window and waved to the man and her son. The car pulled away slowly and, hand-in-hand, the two started walking toward the door.

The sky was growing dark.

It was getting hard to distinguish people from the shadows around them. Twilight—the true witching hour, when the spirits of the land rode abroad in deepening shadows.

A movement swept across Junya's vision. He saw a dark figure in front of the man and the child.

He couldn't see his face, but he was tall. Both

hands were shoved into his pockets, and his shoulders were hunched.

The father and son hadn't noticed him.

They were steadily drawing nearer to him.

Junya was arrested by the sight and couldn't look away. A thought flitted through his mind, and he jerked his eyes down to his watch.

It was five o'clock.

Goosebumps prickled his skin.

A car comes to pick him up at his house, then drops him off at his destination. The car has bulletproof glass. There's only one opening: when he gets into the car and when he gets out. And that once-in-a-month opportunity is tomorrow night.

Junya didn't know if the red car had bulletproof glass or not, but it had dropped the man off in front of the building. No one had said the man couldn't go shopping on his way here. And Inazumi hadn't mentioned who the driver was.

But no one else had come back here. Uzuki and Iwatsuki were both watching the front of the building.

"Inazumi..."

It wasn't far from Junya's position to where Inazumi was standing. There was no time to call Uzuki. He just hoped that Inazumi wouldn't take his hands out of his pockets.

Step by step, Junya closed the distance between them. Ninety feet. Eighty feet. If he fired the gun now, the man would die. If things went badly, the child would also be in danger.

Junya's heart started pounding wildly. Blood

rushed to his head. It felt like his heart would burst.

"Inazumi!"

Junya shouted as Inazumi moved in front of the man and the boy.

There was a moment of silence. Time seemed to be flowing in slow motion.

Junya saw the shadow's right hand begin to pull out of his pocket.

No! Junya's body reacted before his brain did.

"That wasn't very nice, leaving me behind like that!"

Junya grabbed the shadow's right arm, panting heavily. Inazumi's eyes were wide in surprise, as he spun around to stare at Junya, who hung from his arm. His sunglasses fell down an inch, revealing the scar by his right eye.

"What are you—?!"

"Everyone else is mad, too! Let's go."

Junya turned a broad smile on the man and boy, who had no idea what was going on. "I'm sorry. It's so dark I didn't see where I was going."

"Bye bye!"

The child waved at him and Junya waved back with a smile, clinging tightly to Inazumi's arm.

"Why did you—"

"Trust me. Just be quiet and walk with me."

He couldn't let the man find out what Inazumi had intended to do. Nor could he let him find out that there was a large-scale Koryu Alliance operation going on.

So he walked them through the parking lot as if nothing had happened. When they reached the trash

collection area, he turned around.

This place, surrounded by the giant trees planted on the building's property and the concrete walls of the back of the building, was perfectly hidden.

"Let go of me!"

Inazumi shook his arm free and leaned back against the concrete wall.

Junya stood in front of him silently. Inazumi was wrapped in a black jacket, which covered a black sweater and black jeans. The ensemble was topped off by a knit cap, allowing him to blend perfectly into the shadows.

Half his face was obscured by the collar of his turtleneck sweater, the rest with his sunglasses. He'd taken precautions not to be recognized.

And, pulling his right hand from his pocket, he revealed a gun.

"Why didn't you shoot?"

Behind his sunglasses, Inazumi narrowed his eyes at Junya's question.

"When you stood in front of them, you hesitated. If you were thinking about shooting for so long, you should have been able to."

But he hadn't. It was as if he were waiting till the very last second for someone to save him.

Junya was glad he hadn't shot the man. But he just wanted to know what was going through Inazumi's mind.

"Were you...scared?"

Inazumi's shoulders were shaking.

"I would have had to pull a gun on that kid."

A rattling laugh started deep in Inazumi's throat and, leaning back against the concrete wall, he covered his face in his hands.

"I knew he would glare at me and do anything to protect his father, without ever knowing who he was up against."

His laughter continued.

"Inazumi—"

There was a note of self-loathing in his voice.

"I couldn't remember what I came here to do. I was at the end of my rope, ready to take revenge for the old man, and then I just couldn't move. And then you showed up. That's when I knew it was all over."

"What?"

Without acknowledging Junya's question, Inazumi slowly raised his right hand and turned his gun on Junya.

"Inazumi—"

A shudder ran through him.

"Don't look so scared."

He chuckled and turned the gun on himself, holding it against his temple.

"Don't do it." Junya's skin was covered in goosebumps.

"Stay back."

Junya reached out to Inazumi, but his hand stopped in midair.

"I've only got one bullet left. I don't want to waste it." Inazumi laughed. But there was no conviction in it. "This is what happens when you put all your eggs in one basket. You just gotta laugh."

"I don't think it's funny!" Junya shouted desperately.

He realized there was nothing he could do to stop Inazumi. But that was exactly why he couldn't give up. As soon as he surrendered, everything would be lost.

"Do you remember what you said to me when you left, Inazumi? You told me that you didn't have the strength to turn back anymore and that you trusted your fate to me."

"That doesn't sound like me."

"Well, you said it!"

Junya tried to figure out how he could let Uzuki know where they were. He had the cell phone in his pocket. But he couldn't exactly call Uzuki right in front of Inazumi.

"And I got here in time, so you didn't take your revenge. Once you entrust your life to someone, you can't just do whatever you want with it anymore."

"That's not what I meant," Inazumi cried in passionate denial.

"No? Isn't that what you said?"

"I wasn't trusting you to decide if I lived or died. I just wanted you to choose whether I killed him or myself."

"That's ridiculous! Do you expect me to believe that?"

"I told you, there's no going back!" The finger of Inazumi's right hand twitched slightly. "I was about to turn my back on the gang and spark a war. They'll never forgive me. I can never show my face to Uzuki-sama again."

"Don't be stupid!" Junya shouted, as he surged into motion.

He had no idea what he was going to do. But he would regret tucking his tail in defeat; he would do everything he could. For Uzuki, but especially for himself.

There was a dull crack, and pain blossomed in his right hand. When he opened his eyes, he saw Inazumi standing in front of him in shock, his cheek red.

Junya realized he had just slapped the man, then immediately grabbed for Inazumi's right hand, which had fallen loosely in surprise. He tore the gun from his warm hand.

"Y-you—!"

"Stay where you are."

Junya turned the gun on Inazumi quickly.

"Shoot me then, if you have the guts."

That had no effect on Junya at all.

"You've got plenty of reasons to kill me. I hit you, I kidnapped you—I shamed you."

"I don't want to kill you."

"Then let me do it myself."

Inazumi took a Swiss army knife from his coat. With a grin, he held the blade against his throat.

"Inazumi!"

"If you don't want to watch, you'd better leave."

"I can't do that."

"Then wring your hands and watch me die."

"I can't do that, either."

Junya didn't know what to do.

He needed to get Inazumi to drop the knife. He

had never handled a gun before, so there was no way he could shoot the knife out of Inazumi's hand without hurting him. And once people heard a gunshot, all hell would break loose.

If he took even one step forward, Inazumi would just press the knife into his throat.

Don't do anything to make me regret it.

Every last hair on your head belongs to me.

Uzuki's voice ran through Junya's mind. What would Uzuki do?

Junya turned the gun in his hand and aimed it at his own temple.

"What are you doing?"

"What does it look like?"

Cold spilled down Junya's spine, but he couldn't think of anything else to do.

"I told you that I gave my body to Uzuki. Not even the hair on my head belongs to me."

"Quit jerking me around!"

"I'm serious."

Junya saw just a hint of hesitation pass over Inazumi's face. He went on. "If you care about Uzuki, put the knife down."

He took a step forward.

"You can't threaten me."

"It's not a threat."

"Whatever. I can see your hand shaking!"

"I can still pull a trigger."

"Why would you do that?"

After a moment's thought, Junya gave the answer that was in his heart. "It would save your life."

"Are you stupid?"

"Uzuki is working hard for that thing you call stupidity. I swore I would do whatever I could to help Uzuki. I don't care if I have to risk my life for that."

If nothing else, Inazumi was someone Uzuki could trust.

Junya knew that innumerable dangers awaited Uzuki after this. In order to survive, he would need every person he could get who understood him and would give their lives for him.

"No," Inazumi moaned. "I betrayed Uzuki-sama. I can never go back alive, never serve by his side again."

"Why do you think I'm here?"

The wind gusted. It was cold enough to chill their hearts.

Junya's hand was like ice as it gripped the gun. But the finger curled around the trigger didn't move.

"Uzuki knows everything."

"E-Everything?"

Inazumi looked disbelieving.

"And he came here to save you anyway."

"You're lying!" Inazumi's voice was shrill in its denial.

"Why do you think I'm lying?"

"I-I tried to kill you. I tried to kill that guy. I risked the boss' life and the lives of the other gang members. And you're telling me he came to save me?"

"Uzuki knows how much you've been suffering."

Inazumi's knees began to wobble.

He slowly lowered his hand and turned the blade toward Junya.

"Inazumi—"

"I can't."

Inazumi's haunted eyes revealed the conflict within him.

"You can. Please talk to Uzuki. Tell him exactly what you think, and then hear what he has to say."

"I can't."

Inazumi's feet carried him one step forward. Then, in a flash, the man threw the knife away and rushed toward Junya.

Junya's frozen fingers slipped and the leaden weapon fell into the man's hand.

"Inazumi!"

The moment Junya cried out, Inazumi was on the ground and a black leather shoe pinned the man's hand.

"Oh!"

"Give it a rest, Inazumi!"

A shout rang out, rich with charm. It resounded with an astounding depth. Junya and Inazumi both turned to look at the same instant.

"I'll overlook everything you've done."

A cigarette between his lips, Uzuki brushed the hair from his forehead and pressed down unhesitatingly on Inazumi's hand with his foot.

"Agghh!"

"What are you thinking, waving something as dangerous as this around? If you were unlucky enough for it to go off, your gut would be full of lead."

Uzuki pressed the red-hot tip of his cigarette into the back of Inazumi's hand, and watched placidly as Inazumi screamed.

"Uzuki."

"Get back!" he roared, and Junya felt his arms being pinned behind his back in the same moment. "Iwatsuki-san!"

Iwatsuki nodded in silent answer to Junya's confusion, then turned his eyes to Uzuki and Inazumi. He was telling him to stay quiet.

"Boss—"

"Hey, Inazumi. Do you remember what I told you?" Uzuki began as Inazumi groveled before him. "I never forgave the guy who killed our man. I said I didn't want the body count to keep rising for no good reason. I said we weren't going to take his life in the heat of the moment. We were going to pay him back another way. Do you remember that?"

Inazumi was silent.

"That is what I said, isn't it?"

Inazumi's entire body went rigid.

"I can understand why you would think you couldn't sit by and let your old man get murdered. He was important to me, too. But he told us not to take revenge, to not spill any more blood in his name."

"I'm sorry!" Inazumi squeezed his eyes tightly shut. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry!"

He pressed his head against the ground, apologizing over and over.

"I wasn't doing any of it for him. I just wanted to accomplish something with my life, since he was the one who saved it."

"You shouldn't be so eager to throw away a life that he saved."

Uzuki picked up the gun and pressed it into Inazumi's forehead. Then he pulled the trigger.

"Uzuki—!"

Junya screamed out against it in his heart and quickly shut his eyes. The one he pitied was Uzuki. He didn't want to watch him suffering. But he saw terrible images in his mind.

Uzuki had acted in an instant; there had been no time to stop him. All Junya could do was squeeze his eyes shut.

Please, God—

Junya didn't usually believe in God. But in that instant, he cried out, grabbing at straws.

But nothing happened.

"Click."

Instead he heard Uzuki's voice.

Junya cautiously opened his eyes.

Inazumi's jaw hung open as he stared into Uzuki's face, the gun still pressed against his head.

Nothing had happened.

"From this moment forward, your life belongs to me," Uzuki said with distaste. He rolled the gun back in his hand and shoved it into his pants pocket. "I don't trash my property without a good reason."

"Boss!" Inazumi cried.

"This is officially over. But there's one last thing I have to do."

Uzuki stood in front of Inazumi and pulled him to his feet.

Then, returning the knife to Inazumi's pocket, he crooked his finger at Inazumi for him to come closer.

The man took a step forward as ordered, and Uzuki grabbed his shirt and punched him full-force on the jaw.

Inazumi sunk heavily back to the ground. He stood up, holding a hand to his jaw in incomprehension.

"Uzuki!"

"That was for hitting Junya," Uzuki said grimly, blowing on his fist. Inazumi's face was twisted in pain. "Out of all the mistakes you made, hitting Junya was the worst." His voice, shaking with anger, made that perfectly obvious.

"If he had died, by whatever tiny chance, I would have cut you apart and dumped the pieces in the mountains."

"I'm sorry." Inazumi bowed his head once again, one hand still pressed against his jaw.

"Don't ever do something that you need to apologize to me for again."

"Yes, boss."

"If you care about me and the gang, then act like it. We're not going to let you get away with lip service. Don't you ever forget that."

"I won't!"

Inazumi's answer was wrung from the very bottom of his heart. It resonated within Junya.

"Junya." Uzuki turned to look at Junya. "Do you want to take a swing, too?"

Looking at Uzuki's face in profile as he lit a fresh cigarette, Junya couldn't think of anything to say. He shook his head.

"Iwatsuki," Uzuki called without turning around.

"Yes, sir?"

"You can take care of the rest."

He spit the words out around the cigarette in his lips. Uzuki grabbed Junya's arm and they walked away.

There was no reason to say where they were going or what they were doing.

The strength of Uzuki's grip showed how he felt. The warmth Junya felt was Uzuki's love.

Chapter Eight

They were silent in the car as Uzuki drove. He rested the hand that wasn't turning the steering wheel on Junya's hand.

Junya could feel his palm getting sweatier. The strength in Uzuki's fingers filled Junya with so much emotion that he wanted to cry.

As they sped down the metropolitan highway, the car's red taillights illuminated a swath of road behind them. Even the most congested roads didn't bother Junya. He was anticipating what would come next and endured the wait.

They finally arrived at the hotel in Shinjuku.

Uzuki pulled into the underground parking garage, then they entered the elevator in silence. Uzuki pushed the button for the lobby, then turned around and pushed Junya back against the wall with a kiss.

Their teeth bumped together, just like when they had both been new to kissing. Junya resisted the pain of it; he wanted this contact just as much as Uzuki did.

Uzuki's arms soon wrapped around him and he pressed the kiss forward himself. Their tongues tangled. Junya had trouble breathing through his desire to explore Uzuki's mouth.

At last the elevator came to a stop and the doors slowly opened.

"Stupid hotel," Uzuki griped. He held Junya's arm and they exited the elevator.

They were walking past the restaurants and toward the lobby when Junya caught sight of a familiar face ahead of them. He stopped.

"Sawa? Is that you?"

He seemed to have spotted Junya at the same moment. The man was wearing a suit, his overcoat slung over one arm. It was Fujiyama. A woman wearing a business suit stood beside him.

"What a coincidence!"

Fujiyama's face showed a mixture of surprise and bewilderment. He frowned at the injuries on Junya's face. "What happened to your face?"

"It's nothing."

"It looks serious. Did you see a doctor? Injuries this close to the eye could affect your vision." Fujiyama reached out to touch them, but was blocked by a hand from one side.

"Please don't touch him." Uzuki's flat voice contained an obvious threat and Fujiyama pulled back.

"Uzuki." Junya tugged on Uzuki's sleeve. "This is my boss, Fujiyama-san. Fujiyama-san, this is Uzuki Kobayakawa."

"I'll go on ahead."

Uzuki interrupted the introductions to shove his hands into his pockets peevishly. He turned his back on them and walked away.

"I'm sorry. He's a little tired."

"Are you in some kind of trouble?" Fujiyama whispered in Junya's ear. "Wasn't he there that night we

went out with Kashima?"

"You've got a good memory, sir."

Junya was a little taken aback.

"I don't know what the story is, but you should cut your ties with guys like that sooner rather than later. They've been all over the news lately and you never know what just one dinner with them will involve."

"Have you ever heard of the Kanto Regional Koryu Alliance?"

"Of course I have. They control the area around Kabuki-cho. They're the biggest gang in this area."

Deep creases furrowed Fujiyama's forehead. A fleeting smile crossed Junya's face at his answer.

"He's the heir to that gang."

"What?" Fujiyama said in surprise.

"And he's my lover."

"Excuse me?" Fujiyama looked shocked at what Junya was telling him.

He was frowning in disgust. Junya could tell he was desperately searching for an appropriate response. "Are you serious?"

Junya had known exactly how Fujiyama would react to this information and exactly what position he would be in as a result.

He couldn't stop himself. This was something he had been waiting days to say. "I'm serious."

"You know what'll happen to you when I tell the company about this?"

"I know."

Junya's unwavering answer robbed Fujiyama of anything else to say.

"We only worked together for a short time, Fujiyama-san, but I enjoyed it very much. Thank you." Junya bowed. "Goodbye."

He respected Fujiyama. He had worked with him for six months. In that short period of time, Fujiyama had taught him many things and Junya had learned a lot. He didn't want to lie to someone like that.

He didn't expect him to understand. He didn't even need him to. But it was important for him not to lie.

"Sawa!"

Fujiyama called to him. But Junya simply kept walking to where Uzuki waited for him, never turning around.

Uzuki had distanced himself from Junya for his sake. Knowing how Junya's company would react to the fact that he was involved with Uzuki, Uzuki had walked away. That consideration pleased Junya, and also saddened him.

Uzuki could be very stupid when he tried to do things for Junya's benefit. Of course he would laugh, unaffected. So Junya wanted to do the same for Uzuki. He loved Uzuki, so he would be stupid for him.

"He's calling you." Uzuki jerked his chin in Fujiyama's direction, but Junya didn't turn around.

"It doesn't matter anymore."

He held Uzuki's sleeve. He felt strangely free.

"I told him we were lovers."

"Junya—" Uzuki stopped and stared at Junya, wide-eyed with surprise. "Why did you—?"

"Let's go to the room, Uzuki."

Junya squeezed Uzuki's hand before he could say anything more.

He didn't pay any attention to the people who were staring at them. He just wanted to be alone with Uzuki as soon as possible.

"You don't regret it?"

"The only thing I regret happened eight years ago."

Junya looked straight into Uzuki's eyes. He would be lying if he claimed he had no doubts, but for Junya it was nothing compared to the pain of losing Uzuki.

"I've made up my mind."

He would give everything for Uzuki.

Uzuki had already taken on so many risks to be with Junya. In order to be his equal, Junya would take on risks as well.

He didn't want to be the only one who was protected; from now on, he hoped to protect Uzuki a little, too. He had no idea how he would do it. But he knew he couldn't do it the way things had been.

"Junya."

"Hurry. I want you now, Uzuki."

There were other guests with them in the elevator up to Uzuki's room.

To avoid people's eyes as much as possible, they stood against the back wall and gently brushed fingertips. The slight warmth let each feel the other, a feeling which clamped almost painfully around Junya's heart.

Finally the elevator reached their floor, but other

guests got off as well.

The carpeted hallway seemed impossibly long. As they walked, one guest disappeared into his room, then another two.

When they reached Uzuki's room in the corner, he pushed in his keycard and then closed the door behind them, just as Junya was reaching his limit.

"Uzuki..."

He didn't know which came first, if he spoke his lover's name or fell into his arms.

Uzuki covered him in kisses, pushing him back against the closed door. He pinned Junya's hands against the door on either side of his head, devouring him. The kiss they had shared in the elevator was like a game compared to the obsessive intensity of this act.

Their tongues ran over each other and the saliva that welled up in Uzuki's mouth trailed from his lips down Junya's chin.

He released Junya's wrists and unbuttoned his shirt. He dragged his lips over the exposed flesh and bit down on his nipples, grown hard from their kissing.

"Mm!"

Uzuki assaulted them with his tongue, then gently nibbled. That minor stimulation was enough to light a fire deep in Junya's body.

Junya contained his rising pleasure and began undressing Uzuki, loosening his tie and moving to the buttons of his shirt. But the pleasure Uzuki gave him made Junya's entire body quiver and his fingers grew clumsy.

"You're so slow." Uzuki clucked his tongue in

impatience, grinning into Junya's face. Junya took a gentle bite of Uzuki's nose for his teasing, and Uzuki's eyes widened in momentary surprise. "What'd you do that for?"

"Cause it looked so good."

"I think you look better. I'm gonna eat you up."

Uzuki loomed over Junya, and he ran away, laughing.

It felt like so long ago that they had last had sex in this room.

After Inazumi kidnapped him, Junya never would've believed he would be free of the fear of death again. The thought had even crossed his mind that he might never be with Uzuki like this, ever again.

In the midst of all that anxiety, he had remembered the good times he had spent with Uzuki.

"Junya—"

Uzuki caught one of Junya's legs as he fled to the bed. He pulled his shoe off, then his sock. As soon as Junya saw that he was going to suck on his bare toes, he yanked his foot away.

"You can't do that."

"Why not?" Uzuki looked at Junya suspiciously.

"I haven't taken a bath in days."

"Don't worry about it," he said serenely. "There's nothing dirty about your body."

"That's not true."

The memory of Inazumi's tongue flashed through his mind. Junya had told Uzuki about his time in Inazumi's prison. But he hadn't told him that Inazumi had touched him.

But Uzuki seemed to sense something in Junya's behavior as he held him.

"You didn't—" Uzuki's eyebrows shot up and his eyes burned. "With him?!"

"We didn't go all the way."

Junya tried to justify it almost reflexively, then gasped. He covered his mouth with both hands, but the damage was already done.

"What does that mean?"

Uzuki was utterly outraged. His low voice dropped even lower and became threatening. Even Junya's spine chilled at the sound of it.

"Does your body belong to me or doesn't it?" He planted both hands on the bed and leaned over Junya. "Are you saying you let someone else touch you?"

"Uzuki—"

Driven by his anger, Uzuki yanked Junya's legs open and violently squeezed the flesh between them.

"Ow!"

"Did you let him suck you off?"

"Uzuki..."

"I said, did you let him suck you off!"

"It wasn't like that!"

"Then what was it like? Tell me everything."

"Uzuki!"

"If you won't tell me, I guess I can always ask him." Uzuki licked his lips. "I went to a lot of trouble to save his life. But I suppose I could make an exception, considering the circumstances."

"No!" Junya suddenly clutched Uzuki's hands as he started to get off the bed.

"It was my fault. You can't—"

"You seduced him?!"

"I wouldn't do that."

"Then tell me what happened!"

Uzuki shook Junya's hands off and Junya sunk back onto the bed. Uzuki straddled him. He pelted Junya's open lips with fierce kisses, attacking his naked chest.

"Ah!"

"I bet you liked it when he touched you here."

"Uzuki—no!"

Uzuki violently assaulted Junya's pert nipples with his teeth. He sucked on them with a loud slurping noise.

"Ahh!"

"Please don't hide anything from me. I know something happened."

His hot breath skimmed across Junya's skin. It drove him crazy.

"I could believe it if things got extreme while you were locked up...But the longer you refuse to tell me what happened, the more it tears me apart."

Uzuki dragged his tongue across Junya's skin as he revealed the depth of his suffering.

"You're jealous?"

"When I think about how someone else might have done something with you...it makes me want to kill Inazumi."

"Uzuki—"

Junya saw a momentary burst of flames in Uzuki's eyes. But the flames burnt out immediately and Uzuki

touched Junya's injuries. "You had to do horrible things because of me, and I didn't even know. This is all Inazumi did to you because he's still loyal to me. But just the thought of what might happen if a rival gang kidnapped you sends chills down my spine."

It was difficult for Junya to look at the pain in Uzuki's face.

"I keep thinking I should stay away, in order to protect you. But that won't work."

Junya laid his own hand over the gentle touch of Uzuki's fingers on his cheek.

"I'm struggling so you don't have to experience anything that bad again. I thought, if I were stronger, strong enough so no one would challenge me, no one would go after you, either."

"You are strong, Uzuki."

"But I let something like this happen to you."

He brought Junya's fingers to his mouth, then gently brushed them against his lips.

"I'm not strong. When I saw you holding the gun to your head, I thought my heart would stop."

"I'm sorry."

"I was really panicking." Uzuki's fingers trembled. "I'm a pathetic excuse for a man. When I found out you'd been kidnapped, my mind went blank. I thought you might die. I might have looked calm, but that was an act. I-I'm weak."

"But you saved me, Uzuki." Junya wrapped his hands around Uzuki's trembling fingers and gazed into his eyes. "You let me stand on my own two feet."

"Junya."

"I kissed Inazumi." Junya flicked his tongue over Uzuki's skin. "And I touched his thing. And he touched mine."

"Junya—"

"But while it was happening, I was thinking of you," Junya confessed, never looking away from Uzuki. "I swear. When he touched me, I can't deny that I reacted. But you were all I thought about. I could never have sex with anyone but you, Uzuki."

"Junya—"

Uzuki squeezed him tight.

"Then I'll ask you again: did he touch you here?"

He licked Junya's chest.

"Mm."

"I'm going to touch every part of you. I'll make you forget that you were ever touched by any man but me."

Uzuki hugged Junya almost painfully tight; then released him so he could remove Junya's pants and underwear.

"I'm going to train your body to never react to any man but me ever again."

"Uzuki—"

He turned Junya around and gripped his naked hips. He took hold of Junya's groin, now exposed to the air. "Ah!"

"Did he touch you here?"

"Not on my skin."

"That's a yes. And did he touch you here?"

A slippery finger moved across the swelling flesh of Junya's buttocks to touch the place between them.

"No!"

"Is that the truth?"

The tip of Uzuki's finger dug into the tight opening.

"Nngh!"

Junya felt a slight, painful tearing as Uzuki pushed past his dry skin. But once he wiggled his finger around inside, his flesh quickly relaxed, recognizing the sensations.

"Agh!"

"I have to make completely sure."

Uzuki spread Junya's legs wide and lowered his head.

"Uzuki—"

"I've barely touched you, and you're already like this?"

Junya's member bobbed, erect from Uzuki's caresses and eager for more of his attention.

"Is this part ready, too?"

Uzuki's hot breath rolled across the cleft in Junya's buttocks.

"Uzuki—"

An unbearable pleasure suffused Junya's body.

"All I did was rub around it with my finger, but it's gaping open. It wants me."

"Nn—ahh!"

When he was penetrated not by Uzuki's finger, but the wet tip of his tongue, Junya's hips jerked away.

His body had no idea how to react to this ticklish sensation, both warm and wet. Uzuki seemed to sense that and thrust his tongue into the opening, digging

further in, pushing aside Junya's flesh with his tongue.

"I can't—nngh! Uzuki, stop—!"

"Why? Don't you like it when I do nice things for you?"

Junya did like it—it was true.

He'd had sex with Uzuki more times than he could count. But today was obviously different. Uzuki's touch alone made Junya's body react. He couldn't hold back the throbbing pulses.

"N-no, Uzuki! It's too much!"

Junya's pleas were ignored.

Uzuki played with the organ hanging between Junya's legs, and it shuddered. Swollen to its full capacity, it burst, spraying droplets. Uzuki wiped it up with his fingers, a sly smile playing across his lips. He smeared it on Junya's stomach.

"Ah—!"

The lethargy following his ejaculation made Junya's elbows collapse, leaving his hips high in the air. Uzuki continued to lick the hills of his flesh obsessively.

"Nn—ngah! U-Uzuki..."

"You're so obscene, Junya."

He thrust his tongue onto Junya's flesh again and again. Junya could feel how lewdly his body was reacting. His hands squeezed into fists and strained, but he could not control it.

"You just came, and you're already hard again."

"D-don't talk—"

When Uzuki's hot breath skimmed over Junya's flesh, it drove him crazy.

"Please. Please—"

"Please what?" the man answered Junya's entreaties cruelly. "I've been so nice to you already. What are you going to ask me to do now?"

"Uzuki."

Uzuki's hand closed around Junya's hard erection, wet with the fluids of his anticipation, and began to caress it again. It made a sticky sound.

Driven out of his mind, Junya struggled to turn his face back to look at Uzuki.

"Nngh!"

"You're this hard just from being touched? I bet you begged for it when Inazumi did it to you. 'Harder, please!' Am I right?"

Junya turned to slap him, but Uzuki caught his hand easily. "Hey now."

He brought Junya's hand to his lips and sucked each finger, one by one, into his mouth.

"I was hoping you'd get angry." He jerked Junya's arm toward him, pulling his body around to face him. He had a smile on his face. "I want to see more of that."

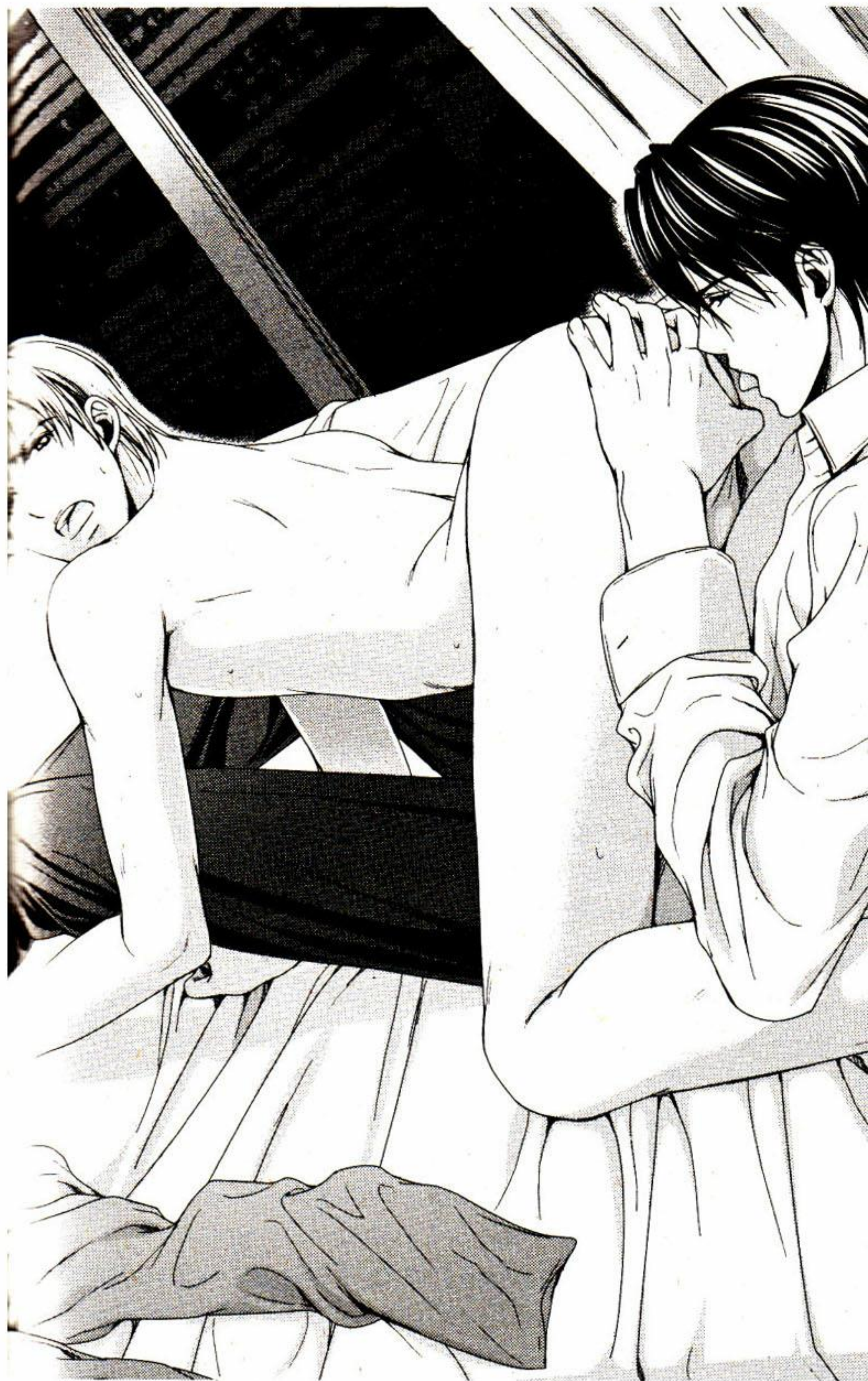
Uzuki reached between Junya's legs and returned to work on that part of his body that had begun to yield to him.

"Ahh! Angh!"

Uzuki increased the number of fingers inside Junya's body and jerked on his member at the same time. Junya's legs shook with the almost itchy sensation.

"Don't squeeze that tight. It feels like you're going to crush my fingers."

"Ah! Nngh! But if you move them, I—"



"I told you not to make sweet faces like that."

Yanking Junya's head closer in a completely unnatural position, Uzuki pressed a kiss against his lips.

His tongue tangled with Junya's, nibbling his lips, and, while Junya was distracted, he pulled his fingers out.

"I'm going to teach you who your body belongs to," he whispered, then circled an arm around Junya's hips. For a moment, Junya felt as if his hips were floating, but then Uzuki's shaft rammed into him.

"Ahh!"

Uzuki thrust deeper and deeper.

"Relax already! You know what's going to happen next, right?"

Changing his position, Uzuki soothed Junya, whose body tensed with stress. He gently caressed his penis, which was now pinned between their bellies, paying special attention to the tip.

He rubbed the liquid that trickled to the surface on the place where their bodies joined, allowing him to slide in and out more smoothly.

"Nngh."

With his other hand, Uzuki massaged Junya's nipples. And he never forgot the tender kisses.

"Uzuki—"

Junya's tight flesh melted with passion and they became one. The object inside Junya's body pounded out a powerful rhythm and he allowed it, slowly, to go even deeper.

Feeling his own pulse overlapping with Uzuki's made Junya happy. Each time Uzuki kissed him, he

could feel a memory of Inazumi fading away.

The man holding him could only be Uzuki. He would never be reacting like this if it weren't.

"Uzuki—"

Junya pressed his forehead into Uzuki's shoulder and clasped his hands tightly behind Uzuki's back. That only made their connection deeper.

"I love you," Junya whispered, almost nibbling his earlobe. "I've always loved you. But everything that's happened just made it so much clearer. I love you, Uzuki."

"Junya—"

Holding Junya's hips, Uzuki drove his body down into the bed. Hair fell across his sweaty forehead. The man's eyes shone with an intense charm, reflecting nothing but Junya's face.

"I want more than just your body."

Uzuki looked almost sad as their bodies moved closer to their most profound connection. Junya hugged Uzuki's head tightly, wiping his cheek on his hair. Uzuki's scent surrounded him as surely as his arms.

"I want more than just love—more than just our feelings."

His words filled Junya's body.

"I said I would give you everything I had, Uzuki."

"I want more than just words."

Now Junya's heart was filled.

Pressing his hands into the bed, Uzuki lifted his upper body. The sight of his face as he fought to control his pleasure excited Junya. "Ah!"

Uzuki changed direction inside Junya's body, thrusting deeper. His body arched backwards as his hips tensed. Thick fingers reached out to cradle Junya's defenseless neck.

"Uzuki—"

"You belong to me."

A shadow of strength passed through Uzuki's hand.

Junya choked as Uzuki pressed down on his throat. He wondered if he would die with Uzuki buried inside him.

The thought shot an intense pleasure through him.

As Junya's erect member pumped its sweet fluid between their stomachs, his body convulsed again and again around Uzuki.

"Promise me, Junya."

As he gently choked Junya, Uzuki's face came nearer. The part of Uzuki inside his body changed its angle slightly as he moved, pleasuring his flesh even more.

"Uzuki—"

"I'll be stronger."

He pulled his hips far back.

"I'll be strong enough to protect you. So—"

Uzuki's hand released his throat and moved to Junya's shoulder.

"So, what?"

"Promise me that every part of you—even your little finger—belongs to me."

"I prom—"

Junya tried to say it, but Uzuki thrust into him.

"What was that?"

"I-I promise that every—nngh! Yes!"

"Every what?"

"Nngh!"

"Say it, Junya."

The movement of Uzuki's hips grew faster. The feeling of being penetrated from such an unstable position clouded Junya's mind with hazy pleasure.

"Uzuki—"

"Say it, fast! Make the promise!"

Uzuki's body fell forward and his tongue stretched out to lick Junya's lips. It glistened seductively, brighter than Junya could imagine.

His first kiss had been with Uzuki. And it hadn't been a simple overlapping of lips. Their tongues had tangled together and their saliva had flowed from one mouth to the other. He knew then that they had done it to build their desire.

"Junya—"

His lips pressed down on Junya's mouth. Junya treasured the desperate kisses, like a fish gasping for water.

This strong, bold, gentle man wanted him so badly there were tears in his eyes.

Junya felt the joy and pain of being loved in the same moment. How many people could there be in the world who had met a person like this, who they would risk their lives for?

Junya didn't need his life to be easy. He didn't need a pretense of stability. He didn't need anything, as

long as he had a person who desired him and a love he could risk his life for.

“Every part of me belongs to you, Uzuki.”

Once he finally said these words, Junya felt Uzuki explode inside him. Hugging each other tightly, their bodies melted together.

“I love you, Junya.”

Their feelings would never change for as long as they lived.

Under the moonlight, the two pledged their love.



Epilogue

“Are you sure?”

Uzuki turned to ask his lover once again. He had been waiting in front of the bank with the parked car.

Junya looked at Uzuki, who gave him a peaceful smile.

“I’ve been thinking about it for a while.”

Squeezing Uzuki’s hand, Junya explained his decision.

“I’m going to live with you, Uzuki. I’ll be with you no matter what. And you’ll be there for me. So if I can do anything to make that easier, I will.”

“Junya.”

Uzuki pulled him close, and Junya climbed into the back seat of the car.

Junya took one final look through the tinted windows at the building where he used to work. He had just submitted his letter of resignation.

It would be a lie to say he felt no regrets. But they weren’t for his job. He regretted the way he had lived his life until this moment. But now, even those regrets were over.

He had chosen this life so that he would have no more regrets.

Uzuki was next to him. He treasured Junya’s life even more than Junya did and took care of him.

He had met this precious man who embraced everything about him and forgave him for all of it. Junya loved him so much that giving him his body, his life, and his love was never enough.

He didn't care what else he lost in the perfection of this love.

At a sign from Uzuki, Inazumi, who was in the driver's seat, pulled away from the curb. The building receded into the distance behind them until finally it disappeared from the tinted windows.

"I'll be yours for as long as I live," Junya whispered, squeezing Uzuki's hand.

"And I'll be yours, Junya."

Uzuki squeezed back. The warmth and power of his grip made Junya want to be stronger, so that he could be worthy of his love with Uzuki.

One Perfect Day

"Let's go on a date."

After their impassioned, frenzied lovemaking, Junya Sawa found it difficult to move so much as his little finger.

Junya had started to sink into sleep, but Uzuki Kobayakawa's entirely unexpected suggestion left him gaping for a long moment.

"Why're you looking at me like that? Aren't you happy I want to take you out?"

Junya must have looked grumpy. He was lolling between the sheets when Uzuki pulled Junya's chin up to make him look at him. Then, his eyes locked on Junya's, he brought his face so close that their noses touched. Uzuki grinned.

His face was usually harsh, his eyes glinting and sharp, but when he smiled with this kind of innocence he looked like a teenager again.

"A date?"

"We can have some really good steak."

Uzuki licked his lips. Junya found the motion of his tongue strangely captivating.

Not only was it nearly impossible for Junya to move right now, but Uzuki knew that licking his lips seductively like that would only fan the flames of Junya's supposedly spent desire.

"I said I'd take you somewhere before and we never went."

"Well, I went."

"Yeah, with some other guy. I want to take you somewhere myself."

Uzuki hugged Junya through the sheets. He nibbled on his earlobe. His tongue darted inside, sending a shiver down Junya's back.

"Uzuki."

"I mean, if you think about it, we haven't had anything you could call a date since we got back together. And right now, if you ignore the stuff with the Hisakata Clan, there's a break in hostilities, so we could go out to eat alone without having to worry."

"Oh!"

Uzuki's hand had burrowed under the sheets and was now exploring Junya's chest. With only the lightest flick of his fingernails, Junya's nipples hardened and an amorous sigh slipped between his lips.

"You seem to be having trouble, so I'll go wait outside. Get dressed."

His hand moved to Junya's crotch and brushed his erection. A sweet fluid welled from its tip as it quivered.

"Uzuki—stop."

"You're right. Maybe I'll go wait at a coffee shop, then we can go see a movie. Then we'll eat and have a few drinks at a bar. And then one thing will follow the next and we'll go back to the hotel and have sex for the rest of the night."

"Nngh—no..."

Uzuki squeezed the tip tightly and Junya's hips shook as his passion spilled out of him.

There was a high-rise building a few minutes' walk from their hotel on the eastern side of Shinjuku. On the first floor there was a quiet coffee shop, where Junya now tasted the Kilimanjaro blend he had ordered.

He had recently become fond of the distinctive acidity of this variety.

Savoring the fragrant aroma, he glanced at his watch to check the time.

"Ten more minutes..."

It was just after 2:50 in the afternoon. They were meeting here at three o'clock. There was only a short time left to wait, but it seemed interminable.

When Uzuki had invited him out on a date, Junya had thought he was kidding. He'd given him no opportunity to refuse before launching into their third round of lovemaking. By the time Junya had woken up, Uzuki was already gone.

He would be lying if he said he didn't appreciate the invitation. But Uzuki's formality in calling it a date had made Junya want to die of embarrassment.

He couldn't stop thinking about it and left the hotel much earlier than he'd planned. He'd killed some time in a bookstore, then walked to the coffee shop where they were to meet. He'd gotten there around two o'clock.

He'd been there for fifty minutes and had had two cups of the Kilimanjaro blend. He sipped it slowly,

trying to maintain an air of calm, but inside his heart was pounding noisily.

Junya looked up every time someone entered the shop, and sighed every time he realized it wasn't the man he was waiting for. This scene played out several times.

He was only waiting for Uzuki, so there was no real reason for him to be this nervous. But when Uzuki had used the word "date," it had made Junya feel awkward.

He lowered his eyes to his table again and let out a small sigh. He laid a hand lightly over his painfully rushing heart and closed his eyes for a moment.

Uzuki—come soon.

As Junya whispered this wish to no one in particular, someone jostled his table.

He smelled a familiar blend of tobacco and cologne.

"Been waiting long?"

Junya looked up at the seductive voice that tickled against his earlobes. He saw Uzuki standing in front of him and gasped.

He was dressed in a straitlaced, slim British-inspired suit and his hair was carefully set. Uzuki wore suits all the time, but he looked like a new man.

Maybe it was because Junya was used to seeing him with the first three buttons of his shirt open and a gold chain around his neck; but seeing Uzuki wearing a necktie and with his shirt buttoned all the way up struck him as bizarre.

"Uh, no. I just got here."

"Yeah?" Uzuki asked dubiously as he reached out for Junya's receipt. By the time Junya realized what he was doing, it was too late. "You just got here and you've already had two cups of coffee?"

"I'm...sorry."

Uzuki grinned and peered into his face. Junya quickly turned away, trying to hide from his eyes.

"There's nothing to be sorry about. I was in the place across the street for a pretty long time myself."

"What?"

Junya turned back in surprise. The tenderness of Uzuki's gaze gave him a start.

"I was over there." Uzuki pointed at a little cafe across the street from the coffee shop. "I was sitting by the window so I could see this place. I was watching you the whole time."

"You weren't really..."

"I was. I saw you look up every time someone came in."

"Uzuki!"

"Your neck must be tired from all that work."

Junya's face burned with embarrassment. Uzuki had been watching him fidgeting apprehensively.

"Isn't it, Junya?" Uzuki put a hand on his knee and warmth blossomed on his skin beneath it. In the next instant, his fingertips dug in painfully.

"Let go, Uzuki. People are watching."

"No one can see under the table," Uzuki said, trying to excite Junya, whose head still hung in embarrassment. "Were you nervous while you were waiting for me, Junya?"

Uzuki knew he had been, but he was still going to force Junya to say it.

"I'll tell you something to make you feel better. I was nervous, too," he said, with the echo of a quiet laugh.

"Uzuki—"

"I thought I was being so stupid. After all the raunchy things we've done together, how could I get so nervous going out with you on an official date?"

Uzuki took Junya's hand in his own and brushed his hair out of his face with his other. He took a cigarette out of his jacket pocket.

He tapped it on the table and glanced up at Junya through his eyelashes. This was reality, but like a dream—Uzuki was blushing.

"I was really nervous even just calling to make reservations at the restaurant."

"You made reservations?"

"Of course." Uzuki looked at Junya in complete surprise. "If I didn't do it, who would have?"

"Iwatsuki-san?"

"Junya." Uzuki smirked at Junya's suggestion. "Why would I ask him to make the call for me when I'm the one going on the date?"

"I guess you have a point."

For some reason Junya just couldn't imagine Uzuki making the call himself. Just picturing the man who sat before him now, the next leader of the Kanto Regional Koryu Alliance, making reservations at restaurants and hotels made Junya feel impossibly shy. But at the same time, it filled him with joy.

"You guess?"

Junya loved how peevish he looked.

"Let's go, Uzuki. The movie's going to start soon."

"Junya."

He slipped out of Uzuki's grip and stood up.

To be honest, Junya didn't remember much about the movie.

There had only been a few people in the theater, so the two of them had held hands the entire time the movie played, paying no attention to the people around them.

Afterwards, they had gone to Sankaitei, the Japanese steakhouse.

They had started with beer to accompany their meal, then moved on to sake. It had an elegant aroma that went well with their food. Once they had stuffed themselves, they moved into the restaurant's bar and ordered some after-dinner drinks.

"That was good, wasn't it?"

"Amazing," Junya agreed without the slightest hesitation. "I thought it was great when I came here with my boss, too. I really understood why you wanted to take me here. But tasting the food with you beside me, it seems even better than last time."

"The food is exactly the same, though."

"Still."

Still—eating with the man he loved filled his heart and stomach both.

Feeling slightly tipsy, they returned to their regular

hotel in one of the hubs of Shinjuku. Instead of going directly to their room, they went to the bar on the top floor.

They sat next to a window which offered a spectacular view of Shinjuku's lights.

Junya left the selection of drinks up to Uzuki. He received a shot glass filled with a translucent liquid as blue as the clearest sky. "What is it?"

"A Sky Dive."

He brought it to his lips. It was brisk and a little sweet, with a nice aftertaste.

"What do you think?"

"It's really good. What's in it?"

"White rum, blue curacao, and lime juice."

"You know how to make one?"

"No way. You don't make stuff like this yourself. It's way better to come to a place like this and let the professionals take care of you," Uzuki said matter-of-factly. Junya nodded at his logic.

He heard a familiar strain of jazz in the background, and it mingled with the clouds of cigarette smoke. Uzuki sat beside him, his shoulder occasionally bumping against Junya's. The warmth he felt each time, the stunning nightscape of Shinjuku—all of it became like rich wine.

Junya felt his head, his heart, and his body swimming.

He drank the second cocktail that Uzuki chose for him, which only added to his intoxication.

"Are you okay?"

When they returned to the room, Junya needed to lean on Uzuki's shoulder to walk.

"I'm fine."

Junya answered in high spirits.

He was extremely drunk, but he didn't feel sick. On the contrary, he was relaxed, practically floating.

"I was having so much fun."

"I can tell."

Uzuki sounded a little surprised, but he was cheerful. Just looking at Uzuki made Junya feel cheerful, too.

"Let's get your jacket off so it doesn't wrinkle at least," Uzuki said, after Junya had collapsed into bed.

"Okay."

"Stop hiding under the covers, then."

Uzuki put a hand to his shoulder. Junya laid his own hand over it and turned over.

"You're pretty drunk, huh?"

"I am not."

"Don't lie to me. If you're so sober, go take a bath."

"kay."

Junya felt so great, he rubbed his cheek on Uzuki's arm adoringly. He breathed in the smell of cigarette smoke that perfumed his fingertips and stretched his tongue out to them. He only flicked it over them at first, then licked them from tips to palm.

"Hey!"

Uzuki was leaning over him, his hands on either side of the pillow. Junya circled his arms around Uzuki's

neck. He pulled himself up with all his might, gazing into Uzuki's face, mere inches from his own.

"Take my clothes off."

Uzuki had a strong-looking nose and masculine features. Junya had felt eyes on his companion all night.

"Junya—"

"Take my clothes off, Uzuki."

"Be serious."

Uzuki pushed a pillow into Junya's face and began to stand up. But Junya didn't let go of his hand.

"Let's take a bath together."

"You're really drunk."

"I really am!"

Junya acknowledged the fact maturely. He sat up clumsily.

"So you should—"

"I thought we were on a date."

"Junya."

Junya pulled Uzuki's arms around him, forcing him to sit on the bed. He buried his face in Uzuki's shoulder.

"You've been a perfect gentleman all night. Now I want to finish it up right."

"What?"

"You know. We go to a movie, have dinner, then go to a bar. And now we're at a hotel, so we have to have sex."

"Is that what your dates have been like?"

"I'd say it's the way everyone does it."

Junya countered his teasing seriously.

"Sorry, I've never been on a date with anyone." Uzuki shrugged and Junya stared at him, wide-eyed. "I haven't been on any, really."

Uzuki took out a cigarette and lit it, looking embarrassed. Junya stared at the glowing red tip as he whispered, "So this was your first date?"

"I guess."

Uzuki flicked the ash off the end of his cigarette. Junya was overwhelmed and clung to his back.

"Hey, be careful. I've got a lit cigarette here." Uzuki was caught off guard.

"Then we definitely have to go all the way to celebrate."

"Would you mind if we waited till tomorrow morning?"

"No. That's fine."

"Junya—"

"I know I'm drunk. But that's not why I'm doing this. I'll never forget today."

Uzuki had arranged everything they had done, all for Junya. He'd been embarrassed, but he'd wanted Junya to have fun.

After all that sweetness, Junya wanted to bask in the warmth of Uzuki's body.

He snatched the cigarette from Uzuki's hand and stubbed it out in the ashtray. In the same motion, he pressed his lips against Uzuki's tobacco-stained lips.

"Hey—"

Junya ignored Uzuki's protest and chased after

him as he tried to pull away, capturing his tongue.

The alcohol in Junya's body fueled the fire that burned through him.

The kisses that strained him to his core were met with Uzuki's hesitation at first. No matter how aggressively Junya attacked him, he didn't respond. His tongue was much more subdued than usual in its tangled dance.

But Junya kept moving his tongue, trying earnestly to excite Uzuki.

And he didn't stop at kisses: he grabbed one of Uzuki's hands, pushing him back on the bed, and guided it to his erection. Junya was forcing Uzuki's fingers against himself through the cloth, but Uzuki shuddered at the dull sensation.

Junya knew he was frowning, but wouldn't let go of his hand. He unzipped his own pants and slipped Uzuki's fingers into the opening.

Junya swallowed at the feeling of his thick fingers.

"Uzuki—" He whispered his name, their faces practically touching.

"Damn it, can't you see I'm trying to be a gentleman here?"

"You were enough of a gentleman today. I want to end the day with my Uzuki."

He was selfish and clumsy, but Junya loved him more than anyone else in the world.

"You're not going to regret it?"

A heavy, seductive charm lighted in Uzuki's gaze. Powerful flames burned in his eyes as he squeezed Junya

almost painfully tight.

"Of course I won't."

The man who had attracted Junya was not this tender gentleman. He was the man he'd known before today.

Junya wrapped his arms tightly around Uzuki and hung on for the ride.

Postscript

Here's the second volume of my supposedly gangster-themed series, *All You Need Is Love*.

The third and final volume is also available. You should read them all in a row!

I already mentioned this in the afterword to the first volume, but this series was supposed to be a gangster story. But somewhere along the way, I lost the path and the story wound up somewhere else.

But I think this volume gets closer to what I was aiming at than the first one did. I hope you agree.

I conceived of the newest character, Hayato Inazumi, as a real criminal type, but then when it was revealed that he doesn't know how to use chopsticks very well, he just wound up looking cute.

Noboru Takatsuki, the illustrator, took that scene as her inspiration for the final illustration. And when Daria Bunko was reissuing the first volume, I wrote a short story about it.

It takes place after the events in the third volume.

You should check out the Special Edition section on Daria Bunko's website!

There are character descriptions and a really cool summary of the story there. It's a great page.

And for those of you interested in Inazumi, you absolutely have to read the short story there. I think you'll enjoy it!

I wrote a short final chapter for the reissued edition. My lovely editor requested this story of Junya and Uzuki's date.

The original story was a little too thin, so I hope you enjoy the addition.

I think Noboru Takatsugi's wonderful illustrations really enhanced the impact of the story. I'm indebted to her for that!

I apologize to my editor Hayazawa-san for all the trouble that I gave her. Thank you for your help!

And finally, thank you to all of you who've chosen to read my book.

I hope those of you who are reading this for the first time enjoyed it.

And if you liked this story, I hope you'll pick up the third volume, which is currently available.

Thank you again.
Sincerely,
Jinko Fuyuno, 2006

I WAS WORRIED ABOUT WHAT WOULD HAPPEN TO JUNYA AND UZUKI AFTER THE END OF THE LAST BOOK, SO I WAS REALLY LOOKING FORWARD TO THE NEXT VOLUME COMING OUT. I WAS ON THE EDGE OF MY SEAT WHEN I READ THE SUMMARY, WORRYING ABOUT WHETHER THEY WOULD STAY TOGETHER. I ASKED MY MANAGER ABOUT IT AND SHE SET MY MIND AT EASE ABOUT THE SEQUEL.

WE GOT TO MEET INAZUMI HERE. I REALLY LOVED THE PART ABOUT HIM NOT BEING ABLE TO USE CHOPSTICKS VERY WELL AND MY ILLUSTRATION SORT OF DEPARTS FROM THE SERIOUS TONE OF THE ORIGINAL STORY. I'M SO SORRY, FUYUNO-SAN. SO SORRY.

NOBORU TAKATSUKI



小早川流お箸教室
The Kobayakawa School of Chopstick Use